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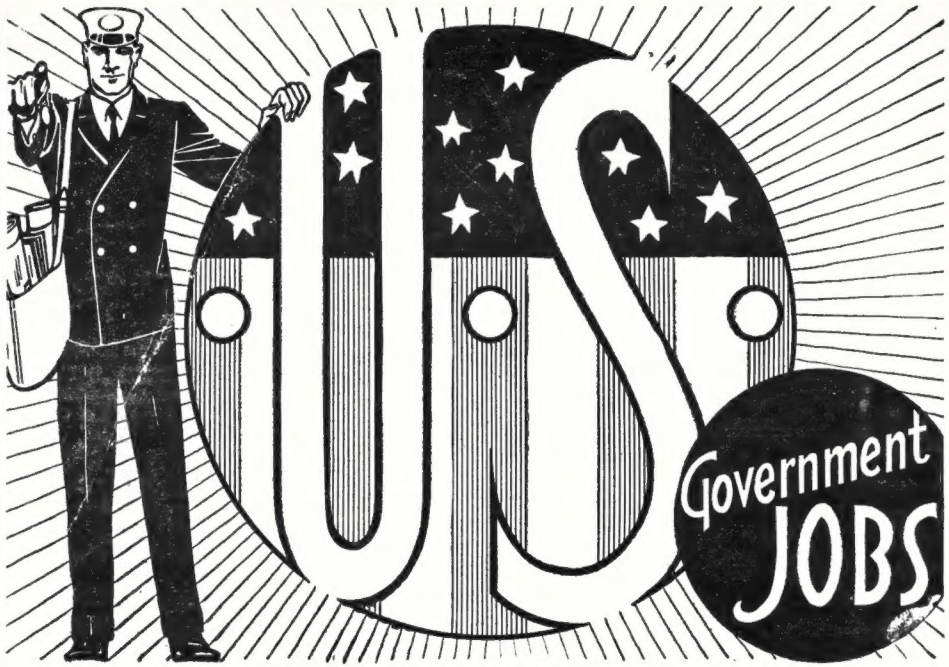
by **BEN FRANK**



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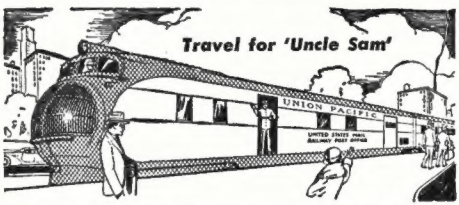

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VOLUME 41, NUMBER 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FEBRUARY, 1951

COMPLETE NOVEL

Steel Rails for Texas

By Jackson Cole

Railroad builder Steve Bannister calls for swift six-gun help from Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield when raiders and renegades impede the Iron Horse with their own murderous brand of sinister sabotage! 9

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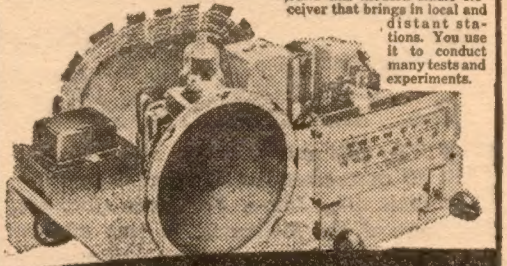

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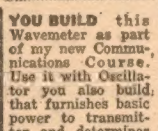

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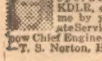

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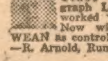

"I received my 2nd Class Radiotelegraph License and worked on ships. Now with Station WEAN as control operator."—R. Arnold, Rumford, R. I.

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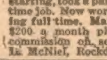

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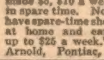

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HIYA, gals and galluses! I reckon you all remember that oldtime classic Indian tale, James Fenimore Cooper's "The Last of the Mohicans." I was mighty amazed awhile back to meet up with a real-life character who seemed to have stepped out of the pages of just such a fiction story.

Jasper Palouse is the last of the Umpquas, an Indian tribe that lived and roamed in the forests of central Oregon. And not so very many years ago, at that.

The day I met Palouse he was sitting on the steps of a country store at "Mc's Place," up in the tall timber. His feet rested on the soil darkened by campfires of generations of his vanished race.

Past and Present

In a little clearing, up on the hillside, was the grave of Chief Mace, last chief of the Umpquas. In potholes along the river below us, Palouse's own grandmother had ground acorn meal with stone age implements. Past and present were linked mighty close thereabouts.

Except for his rugged face and coal-black eyes, Jasper Palouse didn't seem any different from the rest of the group in front of the store that day. A man of robust middle age, he was dressed like any white man and spoke the tongue of the white man without any trace of accent or dialect.

Like most pure blood Indians, Palouse turned out to be a mysterious mixture of pride and indifference. Proud that his people once owned the vast Umpqua region, from the crest of the Cascades to the shore of the Pacific, but indifferent to his own historical importance.

"Sure, I was born upriver a ways. Lived around here all my life. I remember plenty, but it'd take all day to tell you just a little part of it. Besides," he added with a laugh, "you couldn't believe everything. I'm a fish liar. Everybody gets that way on the river. If you want the facts, just ask Lavola."

Lavola, Mrs. Harry Bakken, has known Palouse since she was a girl. She is daughter of the N. W. McMillans of "Mc's Place." For years "Mc" has been laird of the upper Umpqua. Mrs. Bakken has compiled what is probably the most complete record of the Umpquas that is in existence.

It is a tragic story. And there's a solemn lesson in it, if we heed it. The Umpquas met their doom because they chose the path of peace—without preparing for war.

That was long, long ago, beyond recollection of any living person. A peace-loving group of Klamath Indians separated from their own kind, who were forever fighting the neighboring Modocs.

They left eastern Oregon, coming westward over the Cascades summit, and made their new home in the 150-mile long valley of the Umpqua River, apart from all other humankind.

In primitive times, such Indian groups occupied the river valleys. Such rivers as the Umpqua, Klamath, Rogue and Willamette made natural routes of travel, along which were the Indian settlements, separated from other watersheds by rugged and almost impenetrable miles of forest.

So these Klamath pilgrims called themselves Umpquas, and gave that name to the river. They lived by hunting and fishing. Game was plentiful and up from the sea came the great spawning migrations of salmon in spring and fall.

Festival Time

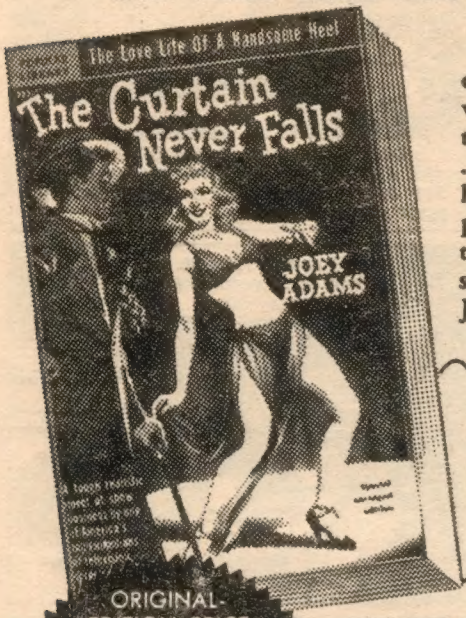
At annual festival time, it was their custom to revisit their people. These festivals or potlatches were pretty wild parties. Gambling was the main diversion and the Indians staked everything they had on such games as horse racing.

The open country of eastern Oregon was better suited to the use of horses than the bedrock gorges of the Umpqua, so the run-

(Continued on page 106)

HE RUINED A WOMAN'S LIFE!

DID FAME GIVE HIM THE RIGHT TO DO THIS?



We all know characters like Jackie, the comedian . . . ruthless, ambitious, not caring whom he steps on — just so he comes out on top. Love to Jackie was just lust and passion . . . and he never even waited long enough to hear the broken hearts crack. No punches are pulled in this fast-paced story about Jackie, the man who's on-stage all the time — and up-stage at that! Don't miss finding out why, for Jackie, the curtain never falls!

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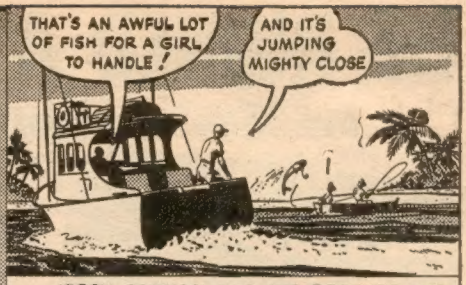
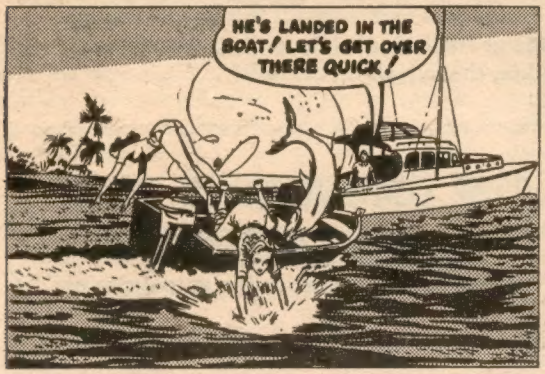


JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"
WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE
LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN

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STEEL RAILS FOR TEXAS

Railroad builder Steve Bannister calls for the gun-help of a fighting Ranger when death and sabotage stalk the Panhandle!

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Raid!

STEVE BANNISTER, forking a big apaloosa gelding, rode slowin on the group of men and women surrounding a portable well drill. A tall young fellow, heavy-fisted, and yellow-haired, there was a frown on his clean-chiseled features, but that rarely left him now-

adays. It was the determined look of a man who has staked everything on a desperate gamble, only to see the cards running wrong, and his stack of chips dwindling.

The winds that constantly swept across the High Plains caught at his shirt, ballooned it, then slapped it hard against broad shoulders. It snapped the brim of his Stetson, pushed at the flank of the big horse. Bannister didn't seem to notice. A man became accustomed to the wind and its ceaseless blowing, up here on the Cap Rock of the Texas Panhandle. And Steve Bannister, with the success or failure of a railroad on his mind, had more than this to concern him.

He reined in at the edge of the group, leaned forward with hands piled upon his saddle-horn. The wind caught at the full skirts and poke-bonnets of the women, flung gritty dust against the legs of the men in their homespun trousers and farmers' thick-soled shoes.

They were all intent on examining a hole that the drill had plugged into the limestone substructure of the bleak Plains. They also were anxiously listening to the whining voice of a man in oil-stained clothing who stood with one hand on the heavy steel bit hanging by its chain from the clumsy derrick, above the hole. The boiler hissed faintly with escaping steam.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hilsing," the driller was saying. "I'll have to make a fresh start tomorrow morning. But I was plumb certain I'd bring in this well. There *ought* to be water here. The witchin' stick said so, for sure."

The man to whom he spoke, Adam Hilsing, a big fellow with a good, honest look about him, shook his head. He fingered a wind-tangled growth of beard tinged with gray, and cut square beneath his chin.

"I'm not so sure I have faith in that witching stick of yours any more, Monk Mosen," he said. "Twice now it's promised us water, and twice the drill has come up dry. This is costing us a great deal of money. We can't afford to keep it up forever, not for a mere superstition that—"

"Superstition!" echoed "Monk" Mosen, the itinerant driller. His black-whiskered face darkened. He picked up his dousing rod—a peeled, forked branch of cherry wood. "I tell you, it never fails! If there's water anywhere under this Texas Panhandle, the stick will find it—and my drill will bring it to the surface!"

Adam Hilsing lifted his shoulders in a tired shrug. "All right," he gave in reluctantly. "One more try. There isn't any choice! We've got to find water. Without it, this colony of ours is ruined. But try to be sure next time, before you start drilling, that the stick is telling you the truth!"

His voice was sharp, as he finished. It was the nearest to anger Steve Bannister had ever seen in this kindly man, and with the words spoken Adam Hilsing swung away.

THE people began to drift away with him. But Monk Mosen remained beside his drill, and the look he cast on old Hilsing's back was ugly—jaw thrust forward, cheek muscles bulging beneath a stubble of black beard. He spat into the dust, ran a sleeve across his mouth and turned angrily back toward the drill rig.

Steve Bannister saw this, but forgot the surly itinerant driller as he heard his name spoken, and turned quickly to see that Adam Hilsing had caught sight of him, had paused and was smiling.

"Steve!" he called. "It's good to see thee, young man!"

The railroader returned the greeting, and swung wearily down from saddle as the leader of this Quaker colony came back to him. More of his attention, however, was for the girl at Hilsing's side and until now she had been partially concealed by her father's blocky shape. She was a lovely, tall girl, blue-eyed, with rich brown hair she wore in buns at either side of her face. The very sight of her was enough to lift the pressure of Bannister's many worries from him, at least for a moment.

But they quickly returned, and as instantly sobered him. His smile was gone as he asked the girl's father:

in a Struggle to Make Way for the Iron Horse!

"Still no well, Mr. Hilsing?"

The old Quaker farmer shook his head. "It's getting desperate, Steve," he said. "If we don't hit it soon, I'm afraid it may mean the end of our colony. We cannot do anything further until we have water. And we will soon be spending the last of the money we saved, paying Monk Mosen to drill for us."

"And if he fails?"

"I'll ask thee the same question, Steve.

JIM HATFIELD

What happens to the Austin and Colorado Railroad, if we cannot bring in water on the High Plains?"

"It certainly won't help matters any with my stockholders, that's sure," Bannister said. "But on the other hand, things could hardly be worse than they are now."

"More trouble?" Amy Hilsing asked anxiously.

Steve nodded. "Another stack of ties burned last night. A track worker was shot. Some of the gandy dancers are ready to quit, and I can't blame them. It isn't worth it for a man to risk his hide for such wages as I'm able to pay, especially when he never knows when the danger will hit him, or from where!"

"It is terrible!" exclaimed Adam Hilsing somberly. "How much more time is left?"

"The grant-in-aid expires at midnight of the twenty-third," Steve told him. "At the present rate, we'll do well to finish this section of the road by then. I've finally appealed to Ranger headquarters at Austin. I don't like to yell for help, but this marauding is just more than I can handle!" He shrugged. "But, Mr. Hilsing, I didn't come here just to discuss my own troubles. I was hoping you folks, at least, would have good news. I think a lot about your struggle here to bring water to the Panhandle."

Hilsing laid a hand upon the young man's arm. "And don't imagine that our hearts are not with thee! We know that thee has gambled the future of the A and C on us. If we fail, thee will pay the penalty of faith!"

"My faith isn't shaken," assured Bannister. "What you're doing here should open a great future for agriculture in the Panhandle. This soil is rich—if you can only find the water to put on it. I want my railroad to be a part of that future, and serve it. But, the way things are going—"

Steve Bannister talked a little longer with Hilsing and some of the other Quakers who had come up. Then, despite their protests that he must stay for supper, he took his departure. There was a mountain of detail awaiting his attention.

He took the stirrup, lifted into saddle. As he touched his hatbrim to the father and daughter and the others, a warmth kindled in his eyes as he looked at Amy Hilsing. Then he pulled his apaloosa about and nudged him with the spurs, heading back the way he had come.

AT a little distance Bannister reined in and turned for a last, frowning look at the Quaker settlement, and at the ungainly bulk of Monk Mosen's steam drill. He didn't know much about Mosen, and was little taken by what he had seen of the itinerant well-digger. For just a fleeting instant, remembering the look he had seen the man direct at Adam Hil-

sing's back, he wondered whether Monk Mosen was to be trusted.

Then he shrugged the doubt aside, and squared about in saddle. Maybe, he thought, gigging the apaloosa forward, there really wasn't any water under that limestone cap rock, despite all the hope and faith of the Quakers and the alleged magic of Mosen's dousing rod. In that case, the dreams of a lot of people were headed for sure disaster.

He rode on, southward, through the tail end of the day. Banners of sunset spread wide across the sky that was like an inverted bowl above these flat, high plains. He followed the course that had been laid out for his A & C line. The surveyors' stakes stretched like a marked trail ahead of him, across the swell of the horizon.

When he considered the distance that must be covered before the twin fingers

of steel could reach as far as the Quaker colony, and the nearness of the deadline by which time it must be accomplished or he would forfeit his grant-in-aid from the state government at Austin, his confidence of success ebbed low.

Presently a stain of dust cloud showed ahead, tawny gold under the touch of the sun, and feathering out against the sky, carried by a constant wind. As he drew

Gunmetal burned hot against Hatfield's palms as he shot the six-gun dry (CHAP. XIV)

nearer he heard sounds—the bustle of movement, the shouts of men, the crack of whips and clank of iron, and the thud of straining horses' hoofs.

This was his grading crew, toiling with fresnoes and teams and with hand tools along the line of the fluttering survey flags. Sweating men, naked to the waist, bent to their shovels or drove the work horses that dragged the heavy scrapers, to break the virgin sod of the plains. They barely looked up from their toil as Bannister passed along the line.

A big, sun-browned Irishman, the straw boss, greeted him with a wave of his brawny arm and Bannister reined in to talk with him, leaning from saddle. The Irishman proudly indicated his laboring crew.

"We're coverin' ground, Chief! If your track crew can keep up with us, and if we're given half a chance to do the job without them killin' fiends interferin', we'll make the deadline yet!"

"Any sign of trouble, Riley?" Bannister asked.

Riley shook his head. "All quiet. I keep a sharp lookout, and there ain't a man of us but is in arm's reach of a gun every minute. It'd be hard to catch us

by surprise. Still and all, don't seem likely them devils from the brakes will hold off much longer. Looks to me they're due to make another raid, any time now." He added, scowling: "Kind of dangerous, ain't it, you ridin' alone like this? If they're out to stop the railroad, the easiest way to do it would be to knock you off that saddle."

Bannister slapped the pouched gun at his hip. "I'm ready for them."

"That wouldn't help you against a slug between the shoulders," the big man predicted soberly. "You shouldn't take chances—not the way these killers strike out of thin air and disappear again into the Cap Rock brakes. I wish we could take an army in there and chase 'em down, clean 'em out. I'd like the job of leadin' the hunt!"

HIS honest Irish face was dark with anger. His voice trembled a little, as he recalled the sudden raids they had suffered, the good men who had gone down before the mysterious attackers from the brakes, the supplies that had been wantonly destroyed by sabotage and fire.

"We've already decided that chasing them would be of little use—and dangerous," the chief railroader pointed out. "But about the other. I suppose you're right. I'll be more careful hereafter, if it'll make you feel any easier."

After a few more words with Riley, Steve Bannister picked up his reins and rode on. The dark ribbon of graded earth stretched ahead of him now. Further on lay end-of-track, where the steel pushed steadily, slowly north.

As he rode, he was not unmindful of Riley's warning. It was not that he was afraid, but on the other hand it *was* folly for him to risk his life by exposing himself to unnecessary danger. The very existence of the A & C rested squarely upon his own broad shoulders—a fine target for some mysterious enemy who was seemingly bent on preventing the railroad from going through. Hereafter, he decided, he would not ride alone.

The sun was a swollen, molten drop of fire, resting on the prairie's rim. Already shadows were lengthening, hard and sharp-edged against the golden light. And, suddenly startled, Steve Bannister jerked rein and came erect in saddle, head thrown up to listen.

Another gust of wind brought the sound to him, a second time. The rattle of gunfire—from the direction of end-of-track!

CHAPTER II

Unexpected Aid

BANNISTER poured steel to the apaloosa, and sent him forward at a hard run, straight down the line of fresh-turned roadbed. As the bronc took him quickly toward the scene of battle, he slipped his six-shooter from holster and held it ready, his eyes slitted against the wind of the bronc's running.

Ahead, now, he could see the end-of-track area as a dark clutter of shapes against the sunset. The yammer of guns was growing louder with every passing second, and the hoarse yelling of men's voices sounded above the gunfire.

Presently, the individual outlines of an ordered clutter began to take shape. He passed stacks of ties, spaced along the right-of-way ahead of the track-laying crew. He saw the diamond stack of the woodburner, trailing a feather of smoke, the flat cars loaded with steel rails, the tool cars. The setting sun glinted redly on the twin lines of laid rail which ended abruptly at the point where work had been interrupted.

Then he was close enough to see the raiders! Mounted men, their horses stirring up spurts of sun-gilded dust as they maneuvered, dashing in to fling lead at the beleaguered track crew, wheeling away again to safety. He could see the streaking fire from the spitting guns, and catch glimpses of the defenders as they rose from cover to fling answering shots.

For the track crew had cover, of a sort, though they were pinned down by the savage fury of the attack. Two of the track layers were huddled, motionless shapes where they had been caught and struck down before they had had a chance to throw aside their tools and grab up firearms. The sight of them bunched Steve Bannister's jaw muscles and made

his fist tighten, rock-hard, about the handle of his Colt.

A bullet sang past his head. One of the raiders had seen him pounding along the roadbed and had turned to offer challenge. He snapped an answering shot, knowing he couldn't expect a hit from the saddle of a galloping horse, and drove straight on.

More raiders were pulling aside, now, to throw down on him. Suddenly, as the guns spat at him, the apaloosa stumbled with a scream of pain. A slug had burned the bronc's hide, throwing him off-stride.

Bannister dropped from leather, letting the gelding go free, and dived into the protection of a pile of ties beside the roadbed. From there he triggered at the knot of mounted men who had turned their guns on him.

With solid ground under his feet, gunplay was a different proposition. At the first slap of the hammer and buck of the weapon against his big fist, one of that bunch yelled and clapped a hand to his shoulder, sagging in the kak. The rest of the knot quickly broke apart, making haste to pull back out of range of such accurate shooting.

Leaving his cover, Bannister started at a weaving run across the space of fifty yards or so that still separated him from the beleaguered track crew. Once or twice he nearly stumbled in the loose earth the fresnoes had left. Bullets winged at him, lifted geysers of dirt about his weaving form. But none of the shots tallied. Then he had reached a second stack of ties and dived behind it, alongside one of his gandy dancers who sprawled at the base of the pile.

The man was hurt. Blood was spreading red across his flannel shirt, mingling with the dirt. His face was ashen, greenish. He groaned and opened his eyes as he felt Steve Bannister's hand on him, and managed a weak grin.

"Restin' up a minute, Boss!" he mumbled. "Then I'll give them devils—" His voice trailed off in another groan.

His fury flaming high, Bannister spotted the rifle that lay under the man's limp hand, and snatched it up. The barrel was warm, fouled with smoke. But a rifle was a better weapon for this kind of fighting than a six-gun, gave a better chance of cutting down the distance the raiders kept between them and the makeshift barricade of the railroad crew.

BANNISTER laid its long barrel across the top of the pile of ties and hunted a target in the swirl of dust and lunging horsemen beyond.

Almost at once he spotted their leader —a big fellow, hatless, with unkept red hair that whipped about his shoulders. It was the first time Bannister had ever laid eyes on this man, but he knew him at once, though he didn't even know his name. But he had heard him described often enough by members of his crews who had suffered from the attacks the redhead hurled against them. He sat a silver-worked Mexican charro saddle, on the back of a wide-barreled black mare. His mouth was open as he yelled orders to his men, while a six-gun in his fist streaked smoke.

Bannister's first shot at the fellow was too hurried. Grimly he levered out the spent casing and, cuddling the stock of the barrel against his cheek, lined his sights and took a careful bead on the redhead. As the raider leader was, at this moment, motionless in saddle, he was a fine target. With the sureness of a trained rifleman, Steve Bannister squeezed off the shot—and heard only the harmless click of the firing pin.

He cursed in chagrin, snatched the rifle away from his shoulder, and threw open the bolt. Reeking smoke swam in the chamber and swirled into his eyes and as he had suspected, the last shell had been used. He threw the useless rifle from him, snatched out his six-gun. But by that time his chance was gone. The red-headed leader of the attackers was lost in that maelstrom of drifting dust.

He glanced about at his embattled crew. More than one man was scowling as he fumbled in his pocket for shells, or checked the loads in his weapon. It looked bad for their end of the fight. The A & C had been functioning on short funds all along—insufficient manpower, no more steel than could be stretched to the utmost to do the job, and now, in the middle of a fight, ammunition was running short.

"Don't waste lead!" Steve shouted at his men, above the turmoil. "Wait till you've got a target before you trigger!"

Then he saw something which dragged a startled exclamation from him.

On the rear steps of a tool dispensary car stood a man he would never have expected to see here. No railroader, but a soft-paunched man in city clothes, his pink jowls clean-shaven, his bald head shining. He did not belong in a construction camp, and certainly he did not belong in the midst of a gunfight between armed horsemen and a fighting crew of railroad builders.

Yet, as out of place as he was, this city man was taking part in the battle. Calmly and coldly he stood there on the platform of the railroad car with a six-gun in his hand, and threw his bullets at the enemy. Hs was an awkward enough gunman, for his face twisted and his arm jerked with each pull at the trigger, and probably he wasted every shot. But Bannister had to admire his courage.

He left his shelter and scurried over to the side of the car.

"Oliver!" he yelled above the gunfire. "Wade Oliver!" The man looked down from the platform, nodded a curt greeting.

"Well, Bannister! This is quite a reception!"

Between shots, as Bannister husbanded his dwindling supply of bullets and sought targets to make each one count, he hurled a question at the man he called Oilver.

"When did you get here? I didn't even know you were coming out."

"I'm sure you didn't!" Oliver said drily, and fired again. "A bunch of your stockholders got together and decided it was time someone made a little trip to see just what was going on here. Being the principal creditor, I was chosen for the job. I thought it would be best to arrive without telling you. I got into camp this afternoon, and was told I'd be apt to find you at end-of-track. And look what I walked into!"

Steve Bannister scowled at him through the stinging drift of gunsmoke. "So it's reached the point, has it, where my creditors have started spying on me?"

"I don't like it any more than you do," Oliver told him bluntly. "But the reports you've been sending back have been far from satisfactory—and when there's an investment to be protected, business comes first!"

"Right now," Steve Bannister growled, "I'd say that protecting our hides comes first!"

HE snapped a shot at one of the raiders—missed. Then, above him, he heard a grunt from Oliver, and looked up to see the man from the city frowning at the weapon in his pudgy hand.

"I seem to be out of ammunition," he muttered. "You have any extra?"

"Not that I can spare!" Bannister told him grimly. "You better get inside the car and lay low. We're all running short. When the supplies finally do give out, this thing could get really bloody, and—"

A burst of shouting lifted his glance out across the smoky scene, without at first comprehending what had happened. Confusion seemed to have struck the raiders, and their fire had suddenly slacked off. Then Steve Bannister saw the reason.

A hundred yards or so west of the camp, a deep gully split the flat face of the Plains. And from the edge of that declivity gunfire had all at once begun striking at the rear of the attackers. Two rifles, Bannister reckoned them to be. He was at a loss to know where any reinforcements had come from, but they were there! And they had caught the horsemen by surprise, putting them into a whipsaw. Their fire, too, was deadly.

A rider dropped out of saddle, sent spinning by the force of a steel-jacketed shell striking him dead center. The defenders of the railroad camp, heartened by this unlooked-for assistance, swiftly stepped up their own fire. In the face of this, the raiders suddenly seemed to lose their taste for battle.

"Pull out! Pull out!" The redhead, standing in stirrups with his shoulder-length hair blowing about his head, was yelling to his men.

With a jerk of the reins and a plunge of spurs into his black mare's flanks, he was away. The others strung out after him. They streaked off quickly through the settling dust, with red sunlight winking from bit chains and from the silver mounting of the leader's Mexican saddle.

Steve Bannister ran forward, emptying his six-shooter after them. When the hammer clicked on the last chamber he lowered the weapon and looked about. A little dazed by the suddenness of the

fight's ending, he began to tally the losses.

Four of the track-laying crew were dead, including the man whose rifle he had taken. Three others bore wounds of varying degrees of seriousness. Beyond the tracks, a couple of the raiders had been left behind, motionless on the ground.

CHAPTER III

Cattle King

GRIMLY Steve Bannister walked across the torn earth, with the excited track crew trailing him, still clutching smoking weapons. He stopped beside each of the prone raiders, looking for signs of life, but there were none. They were bearded, hard-looking Border toughs. Aside from that he could tell nothing from their sprawled bodies.

A quiet voice behind him said: "Too dead to talk, I guess."

The railroad man whirled about quickly. The man he faced was one he had never seen before—an unusually tall fellow in range clothes, broad-shouldered and lean-hipped from years in the saddle. His hands and face were deeply bronzed, his eyes were gray-green and level, and his features those of a man who was competent, sure of himself. Snugged to his hips were a brace of carefully worked hand-made holsters, and in the crook of one arm he carried a smoking Winchester.

All at once, Steve Bannister understood. "It was you, in the gully younder?" he demanded.

"Yes," the stranger said, smiling. "And a friend of mine named Buck." Seeing Bannister's quick, searching glance about, he explained: "He's gone to fetch the horses. We had to dismount some distance back, so we could sneak in and get into position to give those hellions a little surprise after we saw them. Buck's my companion of the trails."

He saw no reason to explain, now, that it was as much for the sake of his companion's sister, a pretty schoolteacher in Austin, as for the young fellow's own sake that he had taken "Buck" under his wing. Once he had been instrumental in

Hatfield took two swift strides, and the six-gun in his hand struck hard (CHAP. V)

saving the orphaned brother and sister from raiders on their small ranch, since which time he had felt a responsibility for both of them. He knew the worry of Buck's sister, Anita, about her rather impetuous, adventurous young brother, and for that reason was always glad to take Buck along with him, whenever possible, on his own dangerous journeys. It gave the young fellow a chance to blow off steam, and Hatfield could always keep a watchful eye on him, while training him to be a Ranger himself.

"Well, your plan to stop 'em worked all right, thank good glory!" the railroad builder exclaimed admiringly. "You busted that raid wide open!"

"I wouldn't quite say that," the tall man drawled. "They quit too sudden. I have an idea that hedhead leader had already decided it was time to haul out, and we just helped him make up his mind."

"Anyway, I'm plenty grateful!" Bannister insisted fervently. "Our guns had almost run dry. We couldn't have fought much longer."

The tall stranger was looking at him. "Would your name happen to be Steve Bannister?" he asked thoughtfully.

"Yes," Steve said, "but I don't think I know you."

"No, you don't. But you did send a wire to Cap'n McDowell, at Ranger headquarters in Austin, asking for help against the raiders who were slowing down your rail laying across the Panhandle. He sent me to take a look at things and see just what could be done."

"You mean you're a Ranger?"

The stranger nodded, and extended his hand to show Bannister the shield cradled in his palm—the star-and-circle badge of the constabulary.

"Jim Hatfield's the name," he said.

"Hatfield!" Somebody spoke the name in a tone of surprise and respect. "Say, they call you the Lone Wolf, don't they?"

"Who hasn't heard of Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf?" Bannister cut in jubilantly before the Ranger could answer. "I'm sure mighty glad to meet you personally, Ranger!" He grabbed Hatfield's hand. "And doggoned happy it's *you* they sent! The odds on our side have been too short until this moment, but now—"

Their hands met in a quick, hard clasp, and dropped apart. Hoofbeats clattered along the gully behind them, where the Ranger had staged his surprise counter-attack against the raiders. A rider, with a led horse trailing, came riding his bronc up the steep bank and directly toward them.

This rider was hardly more than a youngster, to judge from his appearance —sixteen or seventeen, perhaps, a lanky towhead with a snub nose and big, splotchy freckles. But a saddle-gun rode under his denim-clad knee, and there was high excitement in him as he whooped:

"Hey, Jim! I brought Goldy! Let's head after them snakes before they get clean away from us!"

Hatfield chuckled in his throat. "Always on the prod, ain't you, Buck?" He grinned as he turned to the railroad man. "Steve Bannister," he said, "this is Buck Robertson, kind of a protégé of mine, as you might say. He aims to be a Ranger himself some day, so sometimes I let him side me and learn the ropes. I think he's got the makings, too."

BUCK returned Bannister's nod of greeting, then turned back to Hatfield impatiently.

"Well, come on, Jim!" he pleaded. "It's goin' to be dark in another half-hour. We'll never pick up their sign if we don't hurry!"

"I expect you're right," Hatfield admitted, with another grin. "Maybe we'd better be riding, at that. . . . Bannister, you or your men want to come with us?"

"There are no horses," the railroader said. "Except for my apaloosa, and I turned him loose during the fight."

"I see him yonder!" Buck Robertson shouted. "I'll go round him up for you!"

The young fellow cast loose the reins of Hatfield's magnificent golden sorrel, Goldy, and drummed his heels against the ribs of his own mount, a chunky gray mustang that wore the Heart 7 brand of the old spread he and his sister had lost. Only Old Heart 7 as the mount was called now remained from those days. Hatfield checked the loads of his Winchester, shoved it into his saddle-boot.

Suddenly Wade Oliver spoke up.

"I rode a rented horse up from the construction camp," he said. "Could I come along?"

No one had noticed when he had joined

the others. Hatfield glanced at Steve Bannister who understood and quickly introduced the man from the East. The Ranger, eying Oliver's pudgy build, asked:

"Just how good a horseman are you?"

"Well, nothing to brag about," the Easterner admitted.

"Then maybe you better stay behind. We're going to be riding pretty hard!"

Oliver didn't put up an argument, but Steve Bannister seemed to believe some explanation was necessary.

"I'll see you later, at camp," he told Oliver, "and we can go over everything then." He turned to the foreman of the work crew, with instructions for caring for the dead, and getting the wounded back to where they could be cared for in the main camp. "Have somebody scoop out a hole for these two," he added, indicating the sprawled dead raiders.

"Right, Steve!" Riley said, without comment.

Buck Robertson came loping back with Bannister's frightened horse in tow. It had been stung by a close slug but was not hurt. Hatfield swung astride Goldy and the three riders left the railroad camp, striking south on the trail of the vanished raiders.

The swollen, blood-red sun had dropped from sight beyond the flat western horizon, and night would not be long in coming. There would be no chance, after that, of following a trail; Hatfield decided the raiders had that in mind, when they chose this late hour for their attack, just before the road crew knocked off work.

The sign was pulling sharply from the right-of-way, pointing south and east. Not far in that direction lay the long escarpment of the High Plains, dropping in a broken wall to the flatlands below this Cap Rock country. Steve Bannister, riding alongside the Ranger, said:

"We figure this redhead and his gang have a hideout in the escarpment somewhere. If they have, there's slim chance of finding it—and a dang good chance of a bullet in the back—if a gent goes nosing around that country hunting for them."

"We won't take any foolish risks," the Ranger assured him."

They rode on.

"When we were riding north this afternoon," Hatfield remarked, after a bit, "I noticed cattle grazing along the right-of-way. A lot of cattle, wearing a Crown brand. Looked to me like your railroad had cut straight across a good-sized spread."

"We did," admitted Bannister. "A man named Jubal King had been running cattle on public land up here for ten years or longer. He's figured himself as the boss of the entire Cap Rock country, though actually none of it belongs to him except for a few acres where his headquarters buildings stand."

"What did he think about a railroad coming in?" Hatfield wanted to know.

STEVE BANNISTER laughed shortly. "Why, he didn't much like it! He knows that where the rails run, farms and cities follow. Besides, with every mile of track completed I won a state grant of alternate blocks of land—land carved from the heart of his short grass empire. He threatened war if I dared to cut his south drift fence. Still, one man's greed couldn't stop the A and C—not when we had the State of Texas behind us!"

"And what happened?"

"Absolutely nothing!" Bannister answered. "I was plumb surprised too, after the big talk King had been making. But he must have known he had no legal leg to stand on. Besides that, his foreman, Vern Lawtry, seems a decent sort of fellow, and I've an idea that Lawtry must have held him back some. Anyhow, King laid down and never made a move when we cut his fence and started pushing north. And now, Crown graze is clear behind us. The next leg of our construction job is to take the line on to the Quaker settlement at Friend. Only trouble is, somebody seems to want to keep me from getting there!"

"You haven't any idea who, or why?"

"None, since it don't look to be Jubal King. He wouldn't have held back this long if he was going to make war against the railroad."

"Just the same," Jim Hatfield said thoughtfully, "I'd like to have a look at the man."

"You won't have long to wait!" Bannister suddenly exclaimed. "Look ahead there!"

Two horsemen had ridden into view, breaking from a screen of scrub willows at the crossing of a sandy dry wash. When they caught sight of the trio from the construction camp, they slapped spurs to their mounts and spurted straight forward to intercept them.

"Heading our way," Bannister muttered, "and in a hurry. The older one is King. The other, judging from the size of him, is Lawtry. It's Crown land we're on right now, incidentally."

Hatfield and his companions reined in and let the riders come up. The two groups faced each other in the long, fading light of the Plains, and for the first moment no one spoke.

The Ranger gave this Jubal King a quick scrutiny. He saw a rail-thin, aging figure whose white hair bunched out over his temples, below a wide-brimmed Stetson. He had a high-bridged nose, a fierce blue stare beneath shaggy brows, a heavy brush of white mustache, stained yellow with tobacco, a jutting jaw, and a mouth that was as thin as a knife-blade.

There was something uncompromising about the very way he sat the saddle, shoulders squared, head thrust forward on his long turkey neck. His hands were veined claws upon the bridle leather.

His foreman, Vern Lawtry, was a strong contrast to his boss. He was a younger man in his forties. He was solid, heavy-framed. His face, mahogany brown from the harsh Texas sunlight, contrasted oddly with his light blue eyes. But the eyes had a power of pentration, and they seemed to read a man as they rested on his face.

The Crown foreman was one who would hold back and let others do the talking, while his pale eyes and his thoughts, hidden behind the dark mask of his face, were busy. Then, when the moment for it came, he would act.

Jubal King had raised himself in stirrups and was roaring in a hoarse bass voice that seemed capable of no tone softer than a shout:

"You, Bannister! What's your business here?"

"The same as it's always been," Steve Bannister answered stiffly. "To build a railroad across the Panhandle!" Plainly everything about Jubal King, especially his harsh manner, was an irritant to the younger man.

Jim Hatfield spoke up, intervening. "Seen anything of a bunch of riders heading this way, ahead of us? A good-sized outfit—close to twenty, I figure."

The eyes of the two Crown men moved to him. Jubal King flicked a curious glance over this stranger.

"And who might you be, that we should tell you?" he demanded harshly.

"You're talking to Jim Hatfield!" broke in Steve Bannister. "Of the Texas Rangers!"

"A Ranger!" The old rancher chortled, not pleasantly. "So you've had to call for help! You'll be sending for the marines next, maybe, to help you shove that railroad through to Colorado!"

CHAPTER IV

At the Crown

VERN LAWTRY stirred in leather, and answered Hatfield's query in a mild tone that was plainly meant to be conciliatory.

"We haven't seen anyone, Ranger," he said. "What would a crowd that size be doing on Crown range?"

"Cutting toward the Rim, maybe," Hatfield suggested. "They just raided Bannister's construction crew—and not for the first time, either, from what he tells me. We were trying to trail them, but it's getting pretty near too dark now to follow sign."

"Good!" thundered old Jubal King. "Here's hoping they get plumb away from you!"

"Why, you danged old warthog!" Buck Robertson's shrill challenge broke out without warning. "Maybe you know more about this redhead and his gun-crew than you admit! Maybe we don't want to look around the Rim for them, but some place a sight closer to Crown headquarters!"

"You'll stay away from Crown!" Jubal King roared. "You ain't welcome there—none of you! Nobody is who's connected with this range-stealing devil here and his railroad!" He swung on the railroader. "Let me tell you something, Bannister! I held off and let you drive through my

fence, and split my graze clean in two with your danged right-of-way. Well, now, stick to it! Stay off what's left of my grass or, by Judas, you'll regret it—law or no law!"

His hot words trembled on the dusky twilight, that was rapidly turning so dark that faces were pale blobs, half-seen, and a man strained his eyes trying to see his neighbor distinctly.

"That's a threat!" Steve Bannister said coldly. "You heard him, Hatfield. You and Buck are my witnesses, in case anything happens."

"Nothing's going to happen," Vern Lawtry said crisply. "Not if the Crown has to start it! We don't know anything about your raiders. We wouldn't be foolish enough to fight the State of Texas, and the Rangers, since they've been brought into this. We've kept the peace so far and we'll continue to keep it. Only—don't push a man too hard! And don't accuse the Crown iron of something it ain't had a part in. There's limits to what a man can let himself take lyin' down!"

Jim Hatfield nodded. "You've made your sentiments clear, Lawtry. I think we better let it rest, for the time being. Maybe we'll be meeting again."

He nodded, and lifted Goldy's bride reins.

"Let's ride!" he told his saddle companions.

"Where now, Jim?" Buck Robertson wanted to know, when they had ridden on and left Jubal King and his foreman behind. "It's too dark to hunt sign."

"You're right about that," Hatfield agreed. "Steve, how far are we from the Crown headquarters?"

"Not far," Bannister said. "We've bypassed it. I'd say it's maybe four miles north and west of here."

"Let's swing over and head for there—if possible, without King or Lawtry knowing. I'd like to take a look around."

"All right. Just as you say, Ranger."

Steve Bannister sounded a little puzzled at the suggestion, but he took the lead, knowing the country. Gradually they veered in a wide circle, keeping a close look-out for sight or sound of other horsemen on the black face of the Plains.

Full night had come, by now. A dim afterglow of the departed day hung for a while on the flat horizon to westward, then it, too, faded and the stars appeared, making a spangled mesh stretching across the dark bowl of the sky. Presently they saw a cluster of other lights, lying on the earth ahead of them.

"There she is," Steve Bannister muttered.

Hatfield nodded. "We'll move in a little closer, then I think you two had better stay with the horses and I'll Injun up as near as I can get. Just on a hunch, I'd like to see if I can catch a glimpse of a certain red-headed owlhooter. There's a chance that the raiders are tied in with the Crown. They could actually be holed up at the ranch, and King and Lawtry could have ridden out to intercept us and keep us off the track until dark. If there's anything to that, I'd like to know it."

"I think you'll draw a blank," Steve Bannister said. "If Jubal King had meant to fight the railroad, he'd have tried to block us at the drift fence. It's too late for him to start anything now, since we've built clear across the Crown and taken all that public land into our right-of-way."

[*Turn page*]

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"You're probably right," Hatfield conceded. "But you have to be suspicious of everybody, in this kind of a game."

THEY walked their horses forward, while the lights swam nearer across the darkness and the Crown ranch buildings began to take shape. They were few, and not large. The prohibitive cost of freighting lumber into this treeless Cap Rock country had determined that. There was a main house, dark now; a bunk shack, a barn, and a few smaller buildings of sod. A nearby water collection tank explained the choice of this location for the ranch headquarters.

When they had got in as close as Hatfield considered safe, he called a halt.

"Dismount and stay low to the ground," he ordered. "I aim to work in close enough to manage a look at anybody moving among the buildings. I won't be gone long."

"Let me do it, Jim!" Buck Robertson cried eagerly. "I'm not as bulky as you, and I can move quiet. Let me do the scoutin'!"

Hatfield grinned into the darkness. "Sorry, Buck—not this time! A little too risky. If they *are* here, there's bound to be guards stationed. Red Ruffin is no gent to trifle with!"

"Ruffin?" Steve Bannister echoed the name questioningly.

"The outlaw who's bucking you," Hatfield explained. "I recognized him at once—had trouble with him before, and I wasn't apt to forget that head of hair. He wears it long to cover his ears. A gang of vigilantes cropped them for him to mark him for a dirty horse thief. He's one dangerous, black-hearted snake. This time, I hope to get to stomp him for good. . . . Now—out of saddle!"

He was already dismounting, slipping lightly to earth and handing the reins to Buck Robertson. By the time Steve Bannister and the young fellow had stepped down the Ranger was already gone, a silent shadow moving off through early darkness toward the ranch buildings.

As the other two hunkered beside their mounts to wait, Bannister said anxiously:

"Isn't he taking a long chance? If his guess about Jubal King should happen to be right?"

Buck snorted. "You don't know Jim Hatfield. He don't ever take on a job he can't handle." He added proudly, "But I've never seen the job that was too big for him to take on!"

So they waited, in silence. The minutes ran out. Steve Bannister felt an urge to smoke and reached for tobacco and papers. He had them half out of his shirt pocket before he caught himself and quickly stuffed them back.

An occasional sound drifted toward them from the ranch buildings—the slam of a door, the brief lift of a man's gruff voice. The yipping of a coyote floated in from the dense blackness of the prairie, broke off and came again from somewhere farther away. . . .

Quickly Jim Hatfield moved in on the ranch buildings. He had removed his spurs, so there was nothing to make a betraying sound as he went forward, picking his way swiftly, cautiously.

The shape of the ranch layout became clearer. When within two hundred yards of the nearest buildings, he lowered himself to the earth and made a careful survey of the place before proceeding nearer. Horses were stirring in a peeled-pole corral but he couldn't judge their number, except to guess that there were quite a few of them. The crew, he thought, must be in the long, sod-roofed bunk shack. He could see their shadows crossing its lighted windows, and hear their banter.

He moved forward again. Suddenly he froze as the drum of a couple of cantering horses swelled out of the dark, from some place to his right. Two riders came loping in. He felt for a gunbutt, waited with his hand on it while the dark shapes of the horses grew against the black horizon.

But they passed by him, though so close he could hear the creak of the saddle leather. Then they were riding into the ranchyard and the gleam of a lantern hung above the barn door showed that the horsemen were Jubal King and his foreman, Lawtry.

They dismounted and a puncher, hurrying out from the barn, took over the unsaddling of the broncs. Hatfield watched as the men conversed for a moment. Then they parted, the white-haired rancher heading for the bunk shack, Vern Lawtry jingling his spurs toward the crude, two-room ranchhouse. A light

sprang up inside it. After a moment or two, Jubal King emerged from the bunk shack and headed for the ranchhouse.

IF "RED" RUFFIN or any of his outlaws were here, Jim Hatfield concluded, they would most likely be in the crew's quarters. To get close enough to learn this for certain was a chancy proposition, but having come this far he decided to take the risk. He headed toward a small earth-constructed tool shed and went lightly forward.

When he reached the shed it hid him from the light of the lantern that swayed above the barn entrance. But there was an open space of twenty feet or more between him and the bunkhouse, with nothing larger than an old ranch wagon for cover.

The barn lantern, swinging wildly in the wind, shuttled its pool of light back and forth across the earth, so that for alternate periods, the ground was lighted up or lost in darkness. Hatfield eyed that swinging circle of light to get its timing. Then he dashed forward from the shelter of the shed corner, just as the lantern began to swing away from him. He had made the side of the wagon and dropped down behind it before the brightness came again.

He let the lantern take another couple of swings, then leaped forward again. This time he managed to reach the dark wall of the bunk shack.

Here the swift pendulumlike stroke of the swinging lantern light could not find him. Pressed against the rough wall he edged along it until he reached the single unshaded window. And, with the greatest caution, he edged into position to peer into the room.

It was a typical ranch bunk room, with crude wooden beds tiered against the walls and the usual litter of scattered clothing and other belongings, of warsacks and riding gear shoved beneath the bunks. The crew had evidently just had their dinner and were passing time in various ways. A poker game with six-gun shells for chips was under way at a rickety deal table in the middle of the crowded room.

Hatfield counted eight riders. None of them was the outlaw, Red Ruffin, nor was there any other man present that he could remember spotting during the raid on the railroad track-laying crew at sunset.

CHAPTER V

Warning Shot

SATISFIED, the Ranger drew back from the window. Actually, he hadn't expected anything different. Even if Ruffin's gunmen were working under orders from the Crown, it would have been too daring for Jubal King to have harbored them on the ranch. So that even though this particular hunch had not assayed, Hatfield meant to keep the rancher on his suspect list until he saw good reason to scratch him off.

He had just turned from the window when the crunch of a footstep sounded behind him, and the sharp sound of a released breath. He spun, saw the dark shape of a man silhouetted in the circle of light from the arcing lantern. One of the crew, approaching the bunk shack, must have lined him up against the square of the window.

The lantern, swinging back, swept darkness across the scene, but Hatfield was already in motion. He took two swift strides, and the six-gun in his hand swung hard. The Crown rider had been too startled to move, and the gun-barrel struck home, cushioned by the thickness of his hat. But as he went down, sprawling, his finger crimped the trigger of a gun in his own hand and it stabbed a red lance of flame into the dirt.

The sound of the shot was as startling, in the stillness of the ranch yard, as any warning tocsin of an alarm bell.

In the bunk shack, excited curses followed the gun explosion. A chair toppled, boots pounded the floor. Jim Hatfield had already spun about and was making for the nearest shelter, the dubious safety of the wagon. Just before he ducked behind it, the lantern made its back swing and he knew its light had caught him squarely for an instant.

Pivoting on a boot heel, he crouched to peer between the spokes of one of the big wheels, six-shooter tight in a sun-bronzed fist. In the bunk shack window,

a couple of men were crowding and jostling one another to peer into the yard. They could easily have seen him as he dived for shelter. He waited for the shout that would reveal his whereabouts.

It didn't come. Instead, the bunkhouse door was thrown open, and he heard excited queries as the crew came pouring outside.

"It was a shot, wasn't it?"

"Heck, yes, it was a shot—and right outside somewhere!"

The bunkhouse crew came milling into the yard, then another puncher came hurrying from the barn.

"Lehman!" someone yelled. "He's been shot! No, just a clout on the head. He's comin' around."

Knowing time was short, Hatfield let the lantern start one of its forward swings and, in the few seconds of darkness that swept over that corner of the yard, made a scurrying dash for the toolshed. He went fast, letting the confusion cover what sound he made. He rounded the corner of the little building, and hauled up for an instant.

The same voice he had heard before let out a whoop.

"Hey! There's a prowler on the ranch! Lehman says he saw him sneaking up on the bunk house window and the lobo knocked him out!"

"A prowler!" That was the stertorous voice of old Jubal King, carrying easily above all the rest. "One of them railroaders, I'll wager. Hunt him down! And don't be afraid to use your guns, boys! I gave that Bannister hombre fair warning what would happen if he didn't stay away from here!"

Hatfield was already heading away at a run across the uneven ground, toward where he had left Bannister and Buck and the horses. Behind him, a gun suddenly opened. Whirling in mid-stride, he saw the flash of the weapon, and saw other guns joining the first. They had spotted him!

Grim-faced, he brought up one of his own Colts and thumbed off answering fire, spaced three bullets before turning again to flight. Some of the Crown outfit had started after him, but they pulled back momentarily from the danger of his bullets.

Then there was a rush of clattering hoofs and Buck's yell across the night:

"I'm coming, Jim!" The next moment Buck Robertson was sweeping toward him, with the golden coat of Hatfield's sorrel stallion gleaming on trailing reins. Quickly Hatfield seized the leathers Buck tossed him, and without wasted motion swung into leather. Buck was already reining back the way he had come, and the Ranger kicked Goldy into a run, quickly overtaking his young companion's gray.

HURRIEDLY he and Buck picked up Steve Bannister, and the three of them went pounding away into the night. Hatfield yelled at them above the thud of hoofs and the roar of the wind:

"There's too many of them for us to fight, and no point in it! But with the time it will take them to get saddles on their horses, we can lose them easy, in this darkness."

"Was the redhead there?" Bannister asked.

"I didn't see him," Hatfield called back. "But that doesn't prove anything, one way or another."

The three riders settled down then to putting distance between them and the Crown headquarters, pushing their horses as hard as they dared risk, over the uneven night-dark ground. The lights of the ranch dwindled and dropped away behind them. Presently, after a good stretch of riding, Jim Hatfield called a halt and they reined in to test the night for sounds of pursuit.

"I don't hear anything, Jim," said Buck.

"Me, either. They probably knew there was no sense in trying to make a chase of it." Hatfield picked up his reins. "Well, there's nothing more we can do out here. I think we may as well head for camp. . . ."

Before the coming of the railroad, Cap Rock town had been a mere crossroads trading post, containing little more than a saloon and a general mercantile store that did business with the few inhabitants scattered through this empty section of the Texas Panhandle. Then the A & C had snaked its way northward across Jubal King's Crown range, and overnight the settlement had mushroomed.

It was still not quite a town, but it would be one when Steve Bannister had proved that his railroad had come to the

High Plains country to stay. Now it was his main construction camp, with his line pushing on from here into the trackless miles north of the old Crown empire.

Big warehouses had been thrown up, switches laid out, offices and dispensaries and housing for the track crews built. There was bustle here—the puff of steam engines, the voice of a crew boss shouting orders while his men unloaded equipment from a box car.

Needless to say, the original saloon and cross-roads store had increased their business tenfold. Whisky peddlers and their kind also had come in, to open business in crude, wooden-floored tents.

Steve Bannister, no drinking man himself, knew his gandy dancers had to have their fun and their whisky, but he kept a stern eye on those who catered to them, and made sure that no poison rotgut was served across any of Cap Rock's bars. He had already given one fly-by-night peddler of poison liquor a thrashing with his own hardrock fists and sent him packing, when he tried to set up for a quick profit at the expense of the track crews.

Coming into the town now, Bannister and Jim Hatfield and Buck Robertson turned their horses into the railroad corral and walked to the tent which housed the railroader's main office. A lamp burned on a support post. Lifting the flap, they found Wade Oliver seated at a deal table with an open account book spread out before him. He looked up as they entered, pushed the book away.

"Well!" the Easterner exclaimed. "You got here all right! I had started wondering if you would."

Steve Bannister shrugged, and pitched his hat onto a file cabinet.

"We weren't looking for trouble," he said. He lifted an eyebrow. "Going over the books, Oliver?"

"Yes." The pudgy man shrugged. "I ought to have asked permission, I suppose, but you weren't around and I am not a man to stand on ceremony when there's a job to be done. Besides, I assumed I had a right to inquire into the shape of your records. That's what I was sent here to do."

"Of course," agreed Bannister, shortly. "Go right ahead. And what do you have to say about the way, I've been spending your money?"

WADE OLIVER closed the big book. "No criticism there," he commented. "You've built a lot of track, for the amount that you've had to work with. You're working as close to the estimates as any man possibly could do. I'll have to give you that much credit, Bannister. But of course, we knew from your past record that it would be that way, or you wouldn't have had our investment in the first place. . . . No, that's not what bothers us, Bannister."

"Then keep talking! If you're here to give me the knife, let's not waste our time with generalities and soft soap. I want to hear the worst."

Hesitating, the Easterner shot a significant look at Hatfield and Buck Robertson. Bannister shook his head.

"No reason they shouldn't hear this," he growled. "They've come a long way, to help me, and the more they know about the whole situation, the better job they can do."

He indicated a couple of camp chairs, and the Ranger and Buck pulled them up and made themselves comfortable. Bannister himself remained standing, leaning against a tent support while with folded arms he waited grimly for Wade Oliver's answer.

The man from the city made a gesture.

"If that's how you want it," he said. "As you well know, Steve, your creditors have had one main grievance about this project, from the start—your insistence, against everyone's advice and the wishes of your board of directors, that this railroad should be built up here across the Cap Rock instead of staying down below and skirting the foot of it. It has at least doubled your expenses. There's no wood, for one thing—every tie your crews are laying has to be cut and freighted in. And to what end? What is there up here that needs a railroad, or ever will?"

"Some day, Oliver," Steve Bannister answered quietly, "this Cap Rock country that you think so little of is going to hold farms and cities, and the A & C will be the heart of it. That's what I'm building toward!"

"Farmland? This barren stretch of nothing?" Wade Oliver waved a palm in a contemptuous gesture that indicated the empty flatness that stretched for miles beyond the tent where they were talking.

"Why, it's useless! Good only for cattle range, and not much good for that! Man, where's the water to grow anything but short grass and sage?"

Jim Hatfield, listening, put in a mild observation.

"Where grass will grow," he observed, "there's bound to be water. Looks to me it's under this limestone cap that covers the Panhandle—which makes it a question of drilling to find it."

The Easterner turned on him, with a chill glance that held little respect. "I suppose being a two-gun Ranger makes you an authority on everything!" he retorted curtly.

CHAPTER VI

Fighting Proposition

HATFIELD heard Buck Robertson's quick, angry intake of breath at Oliver's sneering remark, and he himself stiffened a moment. Then he smiled, and let the taunt slide off him.

After all, a wealthy Easterner like Wade Oliver would hardly be tolerant of some frontier lawman's opinions, in a matter about which he felt himself a better judge. But he wouldn't know that this particular Ranger was an educated man, as well as a guntoter, that he had, in fact, completed nearly three years of college training in engineering, and though his father's death had forced him to leave school without completing his studies, that he had never lost interest in the subject or failed to keep abreast of new developments in the field. There was no reason for explaining this to the Easterner, Hatfield decided, and he let the matter drop.

But Bannister was quick to take it up. "That's exactly it, Hatfield!" he exclaimed. "It's a question of drilling and bringing the ground water to the surface where it can be used!"

"I understood there was a colony of Quakers somewhere along the line who were supposed to be working on that project," Wade Oliver put in. "What about it? Have they produced anything?"

Bannister hesitated. "Well, no," he admitted reluctantly. "Not yet. Monk Mosen, the man who's doing their drilling, has turned up promising traces, but so far hasn't succeeded in bringing in a flow. Still, it's only a question of time. Even before I've completed this next section of the road, I'm expecting them to have a well in operation. And that's all that's needed! One flowing well—and you'll see people flooding in here to take up farms on the High Plains. The land I've already received as grant-in-aid, in addition to what I'll get by completing to the Quaker settlement before the deadline, should sell for enough to clear up my present deficit and finance the rest of the job!"

"And suppose they don't find their water?" snapped Oliver. "Or suppose these raiders slow you down so that you don't make the deadline and so forfeit your grant-in-aid? You'll be ruined, Bannister—and a lot of your investors will be also, along with you! Do you realize that?"

"Of course I realize it! Did you imagine you had to come all the way from St. Louis to tell me?" Steve Bannister's handsome young face showed, in its grim lines, the burden this constant worry had laid upon him, in recent weeks.

Wade Oliver pushed to his feet, facing the railroader by the light of the lamp hung to the support post.

"What I came to tell you," he said coldly "is this. If you've guessed wrong, risking this whole construction scheme on the one wild idea that sent you up across the Cap Rock against the advice of all your backers, then, Bannister, you're through! You've had a brilliant career—up to now! You've attracted a lot of attention and got a lot of important men behind you. But after a fiasco like the one this threatens to become, you'll never again find a backer who'll touch you on any kind of proposition! I've seen it all happen before. I've seen good men gamble and lose, just the way you're doing, and end up putting a bullet in their own brains. I'd hate to see that happen to you, Bannister!"

Face hard and without expression, Steve Bannister shook his head.

"You won't, Oliver," he replied flatly. "I haven't lost this fight yet, not by a long shot, and even if I did, one defeat wouldn't stop me fighting. If I go out with

a bullet in my brain, another hand than mine is going to have put it there!"

For a moment no one spoke. Then Wade Oliver said slowly:

"Your courage is your main asset, Steve. I've always admired you for it, and it can almost make me feel you'll still manage to do what you set out to. Don't think I'm here just to heckle. I have as much wish to see the job put through as any other man, and I stand ready to help in any way I'm able. I hope you understand the position it puts me in."

"I reckon I understand," Steve Bannister told him.

THE Easterner looked at Jim Hatfield, and at Buck.

"More talking isn't going to help," he said, "so having had my say I'll shut up. From here on, the thing lies with you, Bannister, and with those Quakers and their well-drilling. All the money there is behind me, in a fighting proposition like this one, can only stand aside—and wait!"

Even as Oliver's last portentous words left his lips, running footsteps came pounding toward the tent. A man, hatless, and out of breath, pawed aside the entrance flap.

"More trouble, Steve!" he cried excitedly. "A man shot, and a wagonload of ties gone up in flames!"

With an infuriated curse, Steve Bannister swung toward the entrance. Jim Hatfield was right behind him.

"Who's hurt?" Bannister demanded, over his shoulder.

"One of Grady Slocum's wagon drivers —a new man, somebody said. He'd been overdue. Someone found him out on the plains, and brought him in a few minutes ago. Slocum's got him down at the freight warehouse."

Already Bannister had started off at a long, swinging stride. Jim Hatfield dropped into step beside him, with Buck Robertson at their heels. They didn't wait for the corpulent Wade Oliver to keep pace.

"Who's this man Slocum?" the Ranger wanted to know, as they raced onward.

"A freighter—been running his wagons over the Panhandle for five-ten years. Lately, he's been hauling ties for me."

The warehouse was a weather-beaten structure, with a wagon yard beside it and the name of Slocum's freight line painted across the front. Lantern light showed the excited crowd that was gathering outside. It showed a big, high-sided freight rig standing before the warehouse entrance, a six-mule team on the pole, a saddled riding horse, dusty and droop-headed, anchored to the tail-gate.

Bannister and Hatfield pushed a way through the crowd and mounted the three slab steps to a lighted doorway, entered a room that was already overflowing with grim-faced and excited men.

The room was Grady Slocum's office. Two tables had been cleared and shoved hastily together, and the wounded man had been laid out on them. He was a young fellow, who wore the rough clothing of a wagon teamster. He was unconscious, his face dirt-smeared, the whole right side of his clothing fouled with caked dirt and blood.

The camp doctor who had already been summoned was examining the wound in the man's side, shaking his head, his lips pursed at the gravity of the thing.

"Amount of blood he's lost," the medico was saying, "it'll be a wonder if I can save him. He must have been lying out there for hours."

"He was able to talk when I found him," said a man who had the dust of the plains thick upon his riding garb. "Said it was some time this afternoon that he was attacked. He passed out in the wagon, while I was bringing him and the outfit into town."

"Let's hear the rest of this, Barton," Steve Bannister ordered crisply. "What more did he tell you?"

All of the men turned toward Bannister and his two companions as they pushed their way in. A bullet-headed man with sandy hair and a mean eye nodded, scowling.

"Come on in, Bannister," he growled, "and hear the bad news! It has to do with you, too."

"So I heard, Slocum," Bannister said grimly. "Another wagonload of ties, is it?"

Grady Slocum, the freight boss, nodded. "They dumped kerosene over 'em and touched 'em off. Not a stick left, Barton says."

"Who did it?" demanded Bannister.

Barton, the man who had found the

missing driver and rig and brought them in, said:

"He couldn't tell me much, but it must have been that rimrock bunch. They surrounded the wagon, and threw down on him. He tried to pull a gun, but one of 'em opened up and knocked him off the wagonbox."

"A dang fool!" Grady Slocum muttered. "Trying to stack up against that whole crowd."

JIM HATFIELD had been listening with a thoughtful frown.

"Something about this puzzles me," he commented slowly.

"Yeah?" Slocum turned to him and for the first time seemed to notice the star-and-circle shield which the Ranger now was wearing, pinned to his shirt front. His look took on interest. "You're the Ranger I heard was in camp, I guess?"

As Hatfield nodded, Steve Bannister prompted quickly: "What were you about to say, Hatfield?"

"Why, that it just puzzles me that they'd burn the ties and leave the wagon. That they'd go to all the trouble of dumping the load before setting fire to it."

A peculiar look crossed the face of Grady Slocum, a look of darkening anger.

"Talk plain, fellow!" he demanded. "I don't like your way of passing hints!"

"Was I hinting?" queried the Ranger mildly.

"Yes, you were! You were implying that there's something between me and that rimrock bunch! I suppose you'll say next that I hire them to raid my own tie-wagons, shoot down my drivers—"

Hatfield shrugged. "You're the one that's saying it, Slocum. I just happened to remark that I was puzzled. Still"—his voice was flat, his face expressionless—"since you bring the matter up yourself, I don't suppose you're really happy to see a railroad built across the Panhandle. You've had a monopoly of the freight business up here for a long time, I understand. The A and C, when completed, will put an end to that."

Lantern jaw thrust forward, the freight boss drew his bullet head deeper between his shoulders. A vein swelled and pulsed at his temple, and his face had reddened clear up to the receding line of his thinning, sandy hair. When he spoke his voice trembled despite the hard control he kept on himself.

"I don't have to take insults, even from a Ranger!"

The old doctor who broke in on him, with sharp words brought their minds back to a more immediate concern.

"While you gents are palavering," he grunted, "there's a man here who's going to die if he don't get the treatment he needs, and maybe even then I can't save him. Where's the stretcher I sent for?"

It was just arriving, brought by a couple of running, panting men. Everything else was forgotten as the medico supervised the delicate work of transferring the unconscious teamster to the stretcher, then had him carried outside and down the steps and headed for the dispensary building.

Jim Hatfield looked around for Grady Slocum, but the freight operator had disappeared.

The curious crowd was beginning to disperse of its own accord as Steve Bannister approached the Ranger, frowning.

"That talk with Slocum," he said, as he, Jim Hatfield and Buck started through the noisy streets of the camp. "You bore down on him kind of hard, didn't you, Hatfield?"

"He asked for it!" the Ranger said grimly. "He started yelling before he was even hurt. Looks to me like he's got a bad conscience, Steve, for all his protests of innocence."

Bannister shook his head, dubiously. "But granting that he might have reason for wanting to keep this railroad from coming in here and ruining his freight monopoly—why, in that case, did he contract to haul ties for me?"

"He's making some fat fees, isn't he?" Hatfield pointed out. "He might be figuring to pocket as much of your money as he can lay hands on, and still see to it that the road goes broke before it's done."

"But would he?" Bannister was still unconvinced. "Slocum's no angel, I admit, still I can't believe that of him!"

"This gent that got hurt wasn't one of his regular drivers, was he?" Buck Robertson put in unexpectedly. "Didn't somebody say he was a new man?"

"What about it?" Hatfield prompted.

"Why, being new, maybe he didn't sav-

vy the score, so he pulls a gun on these raiders and they have to plug him in self-defense! How's that sound, Jim?"

Steve Bannister muffled an exclamation. "I declare, Hatfield, this young saddle pard of yours has as suspicious a mind as you have!"

"Sure." The Ranger laughed. "You get that way early, in this business. . . . But now, what do you say to something to eat? Or do we skip supper tonight?"

CHAPTER VII

Freight Boss

THE Ranger and his companions invaded the kitchen of the camp mess hall, where the cooks loaded thick china plates for them from huge boilers of beef stew, and filled china cups with strong black coffee. At one of the long trestle tables in the empty mess hall, the three ate and discussed the shape that things had so far taken.

"Where are we goin' to start, Jim?" Buck Robertson wanted to know. "Hunting out that Rim country?"

Hatfield shook his head with a grin. "Hunh-uh. Not without an army, Buck! It's the quickest way you could ask for a bullet between the shoulder blades!"

His youthful companion of the trails nodded sober agreement. They'd had a good look at the Cap Rock rim that afternoon, riding up here. From the flat lands to the east, the edge of the Staked Plain was a forbidding wall that loomed against the sky, its colors shifting light and dark as the shadow of an occasional drifting cloud swam across it. Seen closer, the eroded canyons were visible; so were the dark hollows that were caves pitting the limestone.

Bringing a railroad up onto the Cap Rock had been a tricky proposition of throwing a trestle up Bronco Canyon, where one of the few wagon roads also climbed to this remote high region. Buck Robertson had eyed that trestle with deep interest while Jim Hatfield had explained for him some of the intricate engineering problems it must have entailed for Steve Bannister.

"I think," Hatfield said now, "that the first thing in the morning I'll take a jaunt up north to have a look at this Quaker settlement you've been talking about, Bannister. With so much dependent on their finding water under this limestone cap, it might be a good idea. I'm thinking about that driller you say is working for them."

"Monk Mosen?" Bannister asked.

"Yes. What do you know about him?"

The railroader frowned. "Why, not much. He's an itinerant, with a portable rig set up on a wagon. Adam Hilsing, the leader of the Quakers, found him somewhere and brought him in to drill for them."

"Paying him by the day, I reckon—not for the completed well!"

"You suggesting that he may be cheating them?"

Hatfield drained the last of his coffee. "You said he'd turned up traces," he reminded, "but couldn't develop any of them. Could be he was careful not to. It would be just like one of these tramp drillers to stall as long as he could, and milk all the fees he could get out of a bunch of unsuspecting farmers!"

The railroad builder frowned thoughtfully. "As a matter of fact," he admitted, "I've been wondering about Mosen, myself. Only this afternoon, I caught him giving Hilsing a look that . . . Well, Hilsing had just been talking pretty short to him about the latest well to fizzle out, and maybe he was only naturally peeved. But it was an ugly look, all the same."

"I see." The Ranger's tone was dry. "I reckon I better ride up that way, tomorrow."

He arose, gathered his eating utensils and carried them away to dump them into the wreck pan in the kitchen. As he came back, Bannister joined him on the outside steps where he had paused to roll an after-dinner smoke. Buck Robertson, with his healthy young appetite, was still shoveling away the grub, with a big quarter-slab of dried apple pie ahead of him.

The Ranger and the railroad man looked over the sprawling camptown, hearing the noisy voice of it beneath the high, wind-swept stars. From the direction of the saloons, a block away, men's shouts mingled with the raucous scraping of fiddles and the squall of a cornet.

"It's raw, and wild," Steve Bannister said, without apology, "but only tough, raw men can push a railroad through. When the road is built, though, and we've gone on, this will go. There'll be a town here where we're standing. There'll be men, and women, and their kids, making a new life for themselves on land that was considered worthless before."

Jim Hatfield nodded. "It's a good dream, Steve. It's worth everything you put into it!"

"That's the way I figure."

HATFIELD scraped a match, lighted up his smoke. He shook out the sulphur stick, and was about to speak again when something happened to make him hold his tongue. All at once, a new note had entered the noisy hubbub of noise from the camp's saloons. It built quickly to a roar of angry voices.

"Sounds like a fight!"

He swung down off the stoop of the mess hall.

"Do you have to police this town, personally?" Hatfield asked.

"There's no local law, and trouble my crews cause I figure myself responsible for!" the railroader answered, over his shoulder. "I better head over that way and see what's going on."

"Wait for me!" snapped the Ranger. Dropping his cigarette he quickly ground it out with his heel.

He and Bannister had taken a dozen strides when a sudden crescendo in the brawling racket headed them for the scene at a quick, hard run.

The fight was in the big tent saloon, and brawling men seemed about to rip the place apart. Others were pouring out of the place, in a panic to get clear of the riot, and Hatfield and Steve Bannister had to shoulder through in order to force their way inside.

A mass of struggling, shouting men seemed to fill the big tent. Cowhide boots trampled the puncheon flooring. Fists thudded on flesh. The roof supports shook as men's bodies struck and caromed off them. Chair legs, broken bottles, every kind of crude weapon was in evidence in that rioting crowd.

Steve Bannister collared one of the fleeing men. "What's it all about?" he demanded.

"I dunno!" the railroad worker panted. "Somebody said it started over a card game. Just let me out of here!"

As he broke loose, a grinning, sweaty red face showed at Bannister's side, the face of the grade crew foreman, Riley.

"Come on, Boss!" he whooped. "Let's break this up, huh?"

And then the two and the Ranger were throwing themselves into the thickest of the fight, using their fists, tearing the fighters apart while they struggled to reach the heart of the turmoil.

Unlike the Irishman, Riley, Jim Hatfield took no joy in a rough-and-tumble like this, but he went into it with a calm efficiency, scattering men to right and left, collaring them and throwing them aside, using his fists. Someone swung on him with a club. He ducked the blow, smashed knuckles into the middle of the sweaty, shouting face of his attacker, and as the man fell away from him, seized the chair leg club, and ripped it out of the fellow's hands.

Through the tumult Steve Bannister's commanding voice was roaring:

"Break it up! Stop this!"

Under the determined assault, the milling mass of men was quickly becoming disorganized, splitting up.

Hatfield dropped a man with a solid, bone-jarring wallop and discovered a cleared space about him. Looking around as he caught his breath he saw that the job of breaking up the battle was already nearly completed. Bannister and Riley had bored into the heart of the ruckus and had singled out the pair of bloody, battered fighters who were the center of the disturbance. They had those two split apart and the rest of the crowd was settling down, fighting spirits dampened because of the determined onslaught.

Hatfield had turned to wade in and help in the clean-up when a gun spoke.

The explosion made little impression in the racket that filled the room. But Hatfield felt the nearness of the bullet as it sang past him, to smash into an upright. If he hadn't moved when he did, that slug would almost surely have drilled through his Stetson if not his head.

He spun about, searching for the man with the gun. He did not see who held it, but he saw the weapon at once. A flap in the wall of the tent had been pulled aside,

and a film of smoke was wisping from the muzzle of a six-shooter in the opening. Only dimly did he glimpse the man outside the opening, where the lights of the kerosene lamps failed to strike. But realizing that that man, whoever he was, had just tried to kill him, Jim Hatfield whipped up one of his own Colts and thumbed off a shot.

THE FLAP fell into place, and jerked to the stab of his bullet through the canvas. Jim Hatfield ran forward, thrust aside the flap, and lunged recklessly into the dark alley beside the tent.

There was no one there. If his bullet had found a mark it hadn't stopped the would-be ambusher. The alley was clogged with shadows, only faintly illuminated by the seepage of light through the sides of the big tent. Hatfield looked to right and left, then made a choice and sprinted along the side of the tent toward the main entrance.

In the street, a sizable crowd had gathered to watch the battle in the tent. At once, the Ranger saw he had little hope of spotting the man who had tried to kill him, in that milling mob.

He hauled up, shoving his gun into holster. He was about to turn away when, only a few yards distant, he spotted a pair of broad shoulders that looked familiar. The man turned, and Hatfield found himself staring straight into the eyes of the freight boss, Grady Slocum.

Their glances locked through the haze of dust kicked up by a hundred milling boots. It seemed to Jim Hatfield that naked hatred stared at him from those black eyes. Were they the eyes of a man who would attempt to kill him, under cover of the riot in the saloon tent?

Striding firmly forward, shouldering through the crowd, Jim Hatfield walked directly toward the freighter. Halting in front of the man, he said in a taut, clipped voice:

"I'll take a look at your gun, Slocum!"

"My gun?" echoed the freight boss, harshly.

"I'd just like to see if it's been recently fired. Say, within the last minute!"

The freighter's eyes narrowed until they were mere gleaming slits.

[*Turn page*]

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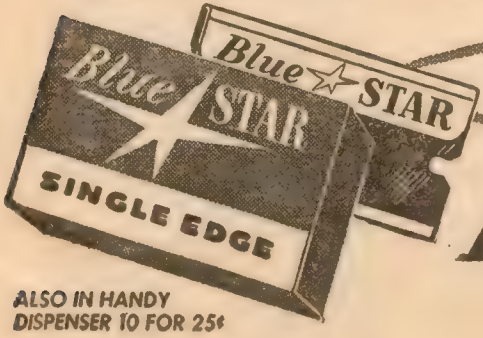

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"You trying to pin something on me, Ranger?" he gritted. Then his mouth twisted into a grimace of a smile. "You'll have to go look in my desk at the freight office, then. Because that's where my gun is, right this minute!" He opened the front of his coat, spreading it to show that he had no holster strapped about his stocky middle.

Hatfield knew he was stopped. This didn't prove that Slocum might not have fired the shot. If he had, and knew the Ranger was hot on his heels, he undoubtedly would have thrown away the still-smoking weapon rather than risk being found with it on his person. But there was nothing more Jim Hatfield could do now and Slocum was grinning at him tauntingly, enjoying his defeat.

"All right, Slocum," the Ranger grunted, and swung away.

CHAPTER VIII

Dousin' Rod

JIM HATFIELD could almost feel those obsidian eyes of Grady Slocum's probing the back of his head as he strode back toward the tent. He wished he knew what thoughts lay behind them.

Did Grady Slocum hate him, merely because of some shrewd guesses he had voiced at their first meeting? Or was there more to it than that—a fear, perhaps, that the Ranger would stumble onto some secret? A fear so great that it could lead the man to try to kill him?

The questions had to be shelved, for the time being. But he would return to them.

When he reentered the tent, it was to find that Bannister and Riley had already put a finish to the fighting and that the place had quieted down. Surrounded by battered, sweaty men, the railroad builder was holding an investigation into the cause of the row. A few men with broken heads were being led off to the doctor's office. The proprietor of the tent saloon was facing Bannister, shouting about the damage that had been done, deploring his smashed furniture and broken glassware.

"These gandy dancers of yours come into a man's place of business and start a fight over cards," he shouted, "and smash the place like a herd of buffalo! I'm expecting full payment from the A and C for this!"

Jim Hatfield cut in before Bannister could answer.

"I wouldn't advise you to try to collect damages," he said coldly. "You've probably made plenty off the railroad, and you knew the risks when you opened up in a place like this. So I think you'd better forget it!"

This shut the fellow up, and shortly afterward, when they left the place, the matter was closed. The straw boss, Riley, was staunching a bloody cut on one broad red cheek. Steve Bannister's shirt had been torn off him and his left cheek was swelling a little. The Ranger showed no marks of the fight except for a sore knuckle on his left hand.

"I guess you came off better than the two of us," Bannister said.

"I guess I did," Hatfield agreed. "But somebody missed by only a couple of inches, trying to put a bullet through my skull!"

"What!" the railroad man exclaimed. "Who was it?"

"I didn't see him—the shot came from outside the tent. But it looks as if somebody figures I'm stepping on his toes and doesn't like it. He almost made the most of his chance, this time. I'll try to see to it that he doesn't get another. . . ."

Next morning, Jim Hatfield and Buck saddled their horses and struck out for the Quaker settlement.

They rode north across this high, swelling short grass land, under a mounting sun. The constant wind pushed at them, hard. The song of a meadow lark floated out of the ruffling grass.

Occasionally they passed clumps of Jubal King's cattle, feeding on open range, or standing about in the few scanty watercourses that made darker streaks of willow and scrub cottonwood against the immensity of the empty plains. The twin steel of the railroad stretched a smear of reflected light, paralleling their course, and the warmth of the sun drew a tang of creosote from the new-laid hardwood ties.

They passed the site of yesterday's end-of-track raid, then the twin rails dropped behind them. They pressed hard, but it was mid-morning when the raw, new

buildings of the Quaker settlement loomed before them, set down in the midst of this high, raw land.

The simple mud-and-frame houses were grouped together as though for company, and there was a store or two. It was actually the nucleus of what might one day grow to be a sizable little town, and it bore the pleasant name of Friend.

As the riders walked their horses along the dusty street, a pretty girl came along the footpath, a market basket on her arm, the wind whipping at the wings of her poke bonnet and catching her full skirts. Jim Hatfield pulled over and tipped his hat to her.

"Pardon me, miss," he said. "But can you tell me where I can find Adam Hilsing?"

SHE GLANCED from one to the other of the strangers, uncertainly, not missing the badge pinned to the Ranger's shirt front.

"He's my father," she answered finally. "What do you want with him?"

Hatfield grinned. "Just to talk. We're friends of Steve Bannister's. I'm Jim Hatfield of the Texas Rangers."

Instantly her face lighted. "Of course. You'll find Dad out in the north field, with some of the other men. They're trying to locate a well."

Nodding thanks, the two rode on. When they were beyond earshot Buck said approvingly:

"So that's Amy Hilsing, Steve's girl. Maybe she's really the reason he wanted to build his railroad up here on the Cap Rock!"

"Not a bad reason," Hatfield agreed.

They left the settlement and rode across open land where the first work of cultivation had been done. They soon saw the group of men Amy Hilsing had mentioned and went toward them at a canter. The men turned and watched them ride up.

Nearby, the grotesquely-shaped well drill sat idle, its boilers cold.

Amid an exchange of nodded greetings, the riders reined in and dismounted. When Hatfield had introduced Buck and himself, and asked for Adam Hilsing, the man he had already picked out as the leader of the group immediately stepped forward, horny hand thrust out in welcome.

"Glad to know you, Ranger Hatfield!" he said and introduced the half-dozen farmers.

Finally he turned to black-bearded Monk Mosen, who stood at one side with a surly look on his craggy features.

"We're searching for a place to make another try at drilling," Hilsing explained. "Perhaps this time we'll have a change of luck. If not—" He lifted his shoulders, in an expressive gesture, and his face with its square-cut beard was solemn.

Hatfield eyed the thing Mosen was holding in his big hands. It was a branching length of cherry wood, with the bark peeled off.

"You're going to find water with that contraption?" he asked with obvious skepticism.

"You don't think it works?" Monk Mosen demanded harshly. "This little old dousin' rod never fails, mister!"

"Can't say that it's done anything for these people to brag about," the Ranger pointed out.

The driller gave him a thunderous look. "Well," he mumbled. "Maybe once in a while you need a little time."

"We've already spent more time than we can afford," Adam Hilsing said, "so let's get on with this. And if we don't find water this time, there may not be another!"

"Yes," one of the other Quaker men prompted, "let's get on with it!"

Monk Mosen looked about at the faces of the men, and with an ill-humored shrug he turned away from the Ranger. Hatfield stood aside, with Buck Robertson at his elbow, and watched the driller's movements with a cool and critical detachment. Buck, who had never observed a douser at work before, was taking in the scene with wide-eyed interest on his freckled face.

Mosen had taken the forked cherry branch by its two shorter prongs, one in each hand, the longer end of the stick thrust in front of him. Now he was walking at a slow prowl across the field, with the Quakers following him, spread out in a semi-circle and matching his pace. Mosen's dark frown of concentration was reflected in their own anxious looks, as they watched the point of the stick for any sign of movement.

When it came directly above an under-

ground flow of water, according to the ancient lore of dousing, that stick should suddenly twist uncontrollably in the hands of the water witch who held it, and of its own accord point straight downward toward the earth.

"How about it, Jim?" asked Buck Robertson, in a whisper. "Is there anything to this?"

Hatfield gave him a brief smile. "Well," he said, "they didn't teach it in engineering college. Whether it works or not, though, what I'm concerned about is that this Mosen hombre may only be stringing these folks along, without any intention of finding water for them—at least, until he's collected every cent they've been able to save!"

"I don't like his looks," Buck agreed.

ON IMPULSE, the Ranger walked over to Adam Hilsing.

"I understand," he said, "that Mosen has already made a couple of bores without striking anything. Mind showing me those holes?"

The Quaker leader looked surprised, but he turned and pointed.

"The nearest one's over that way a couple hundred yards," he said.

Hatfield spotted the pile of dirt, for the bore had not been filled in.

"I think I'll just take a look at that," he said.

Something in his manner prompted the Quaker to trail him and Buck across the field. Hatfield walked around the hole, examined the piles of dirt about its mouth.

"How deep did he go here before he quit?" he finally asked.

"Fifty feet," Hilsing told him.

"Were you watching him?"

Hilsing shot the Ranger a look. "Hardly. There's plenty of work here to keep every man busy!"

"I suppose so. But it's too bad you couldn't have been keeping an eye on him every minute!"

"Explain that, Ranger!"

Hatfield turned. Monk Mosen had come up and had overheard what had been said. He stood there with his dousing rod forgotten in one big, oil-smeared fist, his glare pinned on the Ranger.

"What are you saying about me?" he demanded.

"I'm saying that that pile of dirt never came out of any fifty-foot hole!" the Lone Wolf snapped. "What did you do, Mosen? Disconnect the drill as soon as you hit a trace of water, so you'd be sure and not bring in a well until you were good and ready to?"

"Why, you—"

Hurling aside his cherry-wood stick, the burly driller made a rush at his accuser.

Mosen was not as tall as the big Ranger, but he had a surplus of tough, brute muscle. His arms were clubs as he waded forward, his hamlike fists reaching for Hatfield. But a quick sidestep saved Hatfield from that first assault that was meant to flatten him, and as his antagonist lumbered into range he drove out a stinging right that caught Mosen on the side of the jaw, snapped his head painfully on the thick, pillar neck.

But that didn't end it. A roar of hurt rage burst from Monk Mosen and then, blind to everything but his fury and the wish to break this opponent, he switched direction and was crowding the Ranger.

No chance this time to dodge. A smashing weight struck Hatfield in the chest, almost driving the wind from his lungs, and sending him stumbling backward. Through a booming, buzzing roar that filled his head, he heard the cries of the farmers, and Buck's clear, shrill warning:

"Jim! Keep out of his way, Jim!"

But he had recovered quickly enough from that blow to meet the black-bearded driller's following rush with a chopping left that stopped Mosen in his tracks. That gave the Ranger an extra moment to force wind into his lungs.

Past Mosen's bearlike shape he saw the farmers standing about with looks of horror in their faces. Buck Robertson was jerking a gun from the battered holster he wore at his slim waist. Hatfield shook his head.

"I'll handle this!" he called to Buck.

Then Monk Mosen was after him again.

CHAPTER IX

Battle!

LIKE a sturdy oak, Hatfield stood his ground and, toe to toe, he and Monk Mosen slugged away at each other. Mosen

had his head drawn into the protection of hunched shoulders that were plated with rubbery, tough muscle. It was hard to land a blow that seemed capable of hurting him, but Jim Hatfield sent blood spurting with one thrust against the driller's spiky-bearded cheek. He collected a rib-cracking slam against his own side but twisted away from it as it landed, so that the full force of it missed him.

Then, gauging his opportunity, the Ranger landed a blow that broke through the other man's guard, and snapped his huge body into an arc. Mosen went clear off-balance and, spinning about, spilled down.

He landed full in one of the heaped piles of loose earth from the well boring and rolled off it, floundering, scattering the dirt around him as he fought to his feet. Hatfield let him get his boots under him, then went in, crowding him hard, boring left and right and left again into the thick barrel chest.

Breath whooshed in a spray of blood from the driller's smashed lips. Suddenly on the defensive, he groped with big hands to grab his opponent in a throttling grip and still those jarring fists. Hatfield twisted aside, but one of Mosen's paws caught him, scooped him against that straining chest. A combined reek of sweat and machine oil filled his nostrils.

With a desperate lunge, he shoved upward. The top of his head struck Mosen's chin, and the grip that held him was broken.

Tearing free, he saw the driller with his defense shattered, his black-stubbled chin lifted in invitation to a finish blow. Hatfield started one from the shoulder, putting all his weight behind it. The jar of his fist landing ran clear up his arm, but he caught his balance after the follow-through of the swing. He saw Monk Mosen drop, hit the earth, and stay there.

Breathing hard, Hatfield stood over the man he had felled and flexed the fingers of his left hand. His hands were bloody and that knuckle he had hurt during the row in the saloon tent the night before was aching. He hoped it wasn't cracked. He looked about at the ring of men who had watched the fight. Their faces were pale with consternation and horror.

"I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I know how you people must feel about the violence you've just seen. But I am not of your persuasion, and when a man asks for a beating I'm not above giving it to him. Especially when he's a mangy skunk who has cheated those who trusted and depended on him!"

For a moment, no one answered him. Adam Hilsing was clawing at his square-cut whiskers with a look of obvious distress stamped upon his fine, aging features.

"We do the best we can, all of us, in our separate ways," he finally said. "And what you just did was on behalf of others. . . . You're convinced that Mosen has been cheating us?"

"Dead sure of it," Jim Hatfield answered firmly. "I'll wager that if you set him to work again on this bore he said was hopeless, and make him stick to it, he'll bring you in a well in short order!"

The driller, who seemed to have a constitution of iron, was already coming around after the beating Hatfield had given him. The Lone Wolf leaned down and pulled him to a sitting position. Bloody and dirty, the big man glowered dazedly about him before he could center his attention on the face of the man who had bested him.

"You've got one more chance, Mosen!" the Ranger told him icily. "Set your drill up over this hole and get to work—and no funny business this time, or you'll draw something more than a beating. Is that clear?"

Monk Mosen glared at him from under streaming black hair, sweat-plastered to his forehead. Then, without speaking, he hitched painfully to his feet and started walking over to the drill. Hatfield watched him go, then turned back to the farmers.

"I've got a hunch he's going to behave himself, now. He's found out the wages of greed are darn poor pay." The Ranger looked down at himself. "Now I'd like to wash up and break a clean shirt out of my saddle-bags."

"Of course," Adam Hilsing said, quickly. "It's dinner time, also. Won't you both honor us by breaking bread with my family?"

Hatfield cocked a glance at Buck. "How about it? Hungry?"

THE young fellow grinned, his face still a little pale from the excitement of the fight, and splotchy-looking with its mass

of freckles.

"You know me, Jim! I'm always hungry!"

"Come along, then," Hilsing told them.

The group broke up, leaving a glowering but chastened Monk Mosen to tinker with his drill in preparation for setting it in operation. As Hatfield and Buck walked back toward the village with Hilsing, leading their horses, the Lone Wolf said:

"I don't think he'll give you any more trouble. Just let him understand that you're on to his tricks. And don't pay him another cent until he does bring in that well!"

"We'll do as you say, Ranger Hatfield."

Approaching the rear of one of the simple, wood-and-sod houses, they saw Amy Hilsing waiting for them in the doorway. With her was a kindly-looking woman whom Hatfield judged to be her mother. Looks of anxiety were on their faces as they saw the stranger's battered appearance and the blood and dirt on his clothing.

"Set two extra plates for our guests," Adam Hilsing said to them. "They have just done us and our people a great service. And, Amy, do thee bring Mr. Hatfield warm water, please, and something for his cuts!"

"Of course," said the girl, smiling again, and nodding so that the sun found glints of gold in her braided hair.

Jim Hatfield thanked them, and said, "Buck and I will be stripping the gear off our broncs."

Buck had a puzzled expression on him. Alone with his mentor, as they worked at removing the saddles and sweaty blankets, he asked:

"What kind of people are these, Jim? What makes them talk so funny?"

"Never met a Quaker before, did you, Buck?" said Hatfield, smiling. "They're fine folks. And as for their talk, I guess as a matter of fact they speak better English than the rest of us do. We've plumb forgot there's such a word as 'thee' in the language. It's only used, of course, when they're talking to a close personal friend, or a member of the family."

"You mean, if they get to like us well enough they might call us that, too?"

"Could be. . . Just a minute, Buck," he added, as Buck started to turn back toward the house. Solemnly, the Ranger unstrapped his gun-belts and placed them with his saddle. "These people, by their religion, are opposed to fighting and weapons. It would be wrong to wear a gun into their home."

Buck looked dubious, but he obediently did as Hatfield suggested. As they walked together toward the friendly house, from the kitchen came the warm and inviting scents of dinner cooking.

Buck shook his head a little. "All I can say," he muttered, "is it must take an awful lot of courage to be a Quaker, up here on the Cap Rock."

It was a pleasant hour they spent with the Hilsings, eating simple but delicious farm fare and discussing the plans and problems of the little colony. Hopes had been lifted by Jim Hatfield's intervention and his promise of almost sure success in finding the water they needed. Now, if the A & C could overcome its enemies and push through to completion, their future seemed brighter than it had in many weeks.

This brought the talk around to Steve Bannister and his affairs, and Hatfield didn't fail to notice how Amy Hilsing's eyes lighted and her cheeks glowed rosily at mention of the railroad man. Obviously she was in love with Steve.

Buck Robertson, having finished his meal, left Hatfield talking and went out to saddle up their horses for the return trip to the railroad camp. He came tearing back in suddenly, yelling:

"Hey, Jim! They caught a bronc with a bloody saddle!"

HATFIELD was on his feet at once, with Hilsing trailing him as he hurried outside. Some of the grangers were gathered about the captured horse. It seemed badly spooked and sidestepped, ears laid back, at every sound. The Ranger touched the smear of blood on the battered kak, and found it fresh.

"Why, that's Mosen's saddler!" Adam Hilsing exclaimed.

The Ranger turned to throw a quick, searching glance across the field north of the settlement. He saw the drilling rig, but no sign of Monk Mosen himself.

"Where's he gone?" he said.

No one could answer the question. They had all been too busy with their own affairs to have noticed the driller.

"Saddle up, Buck!" grunted the Lone Wolf. "We've got to do some tracking!"

In minutes they were mounted and heading away from the Quaker settlement, on a search that Hatfield was already convinced would have a grim outcome. Some of the colonists had wanted to come along, but any more riders would only have slowed them down. Only an expert tracker had much chance, following sign on this hard, unbroken prairie sod, where the constant wind swept away sign almost as soon as it was laid down.

Jim Hatfield found, however, the two sets of prints that Mosen's bronc had left, in being ridden away from the settlement and in wandering back with empty saddle and stirrups. He chose the former because they pointed a more direct course, and because the weight of the man in the saddle had added to the clearness of the prints. They led southward, and Hatfield and Buck set out in the same direction.

Mosen had been riding fast, as though spurred by some urgent project. Following his trail, they pressed as hard as they dared, but there was always the risk of overrunning the sign and losing it. And in fact, that nearly happened. Jim Hatfield suddenly broke a silence of ten or fifteen minutes by reining in sharply and exclaiming:

"Hold it, Buck! Look t h e r e — he changed direction all at once. Pulled sharp toward the right!"

He stood in stirrups, and threw a quick look around. A hundred rods off to the west, a dry wash lined with scrub willows ran parallel with their course.

"I think he headed for those bushes," the Ranger said. "Must have seen or heard something there that made him change his mind."

"But what, Jim?"

Not answering, Hatfield sent Goldy in this new direction. As he came in toward the draw, something prompted him to unsheath one of his guns, which he had strapped in place about his hips before leaving the Quaker colony.

Wind rattled the dry brush and the sagging, dusty willows, but there was no sound or sign of life. Hatfield didn't know why he was so suddenly sure that they had reached the end of the trail, but he was somehow not at all surprised when Goldy suddenly curveted and snorted with displeasure. And there, in the shadowed declivity, lay the body of Monk Mosen, blood-smeared from the hole made by a six-gun bullet that had smashed through his middle, at close range.

A quick survey satisfied the Ranger that whoever had done this was already gone. He slipped his Colt back into holster and, speaking to Goldy to steady him, swung down. When Buck joined him he was kneeling at Mosen's side.

There was still a faint flicker of life in the big driller. His eyes half-opened, and he peered sightlessly up at them, his bloody, bearded lips working.

"Who did it?" Jim Hatfield prodded him, voice pitched loud to cut through the fog of the dying man's dulled senses. "Who shot you, Monk?"

The lips trembled, forming words that had no breath behind them. Hatfield leaned close.

"Try to speak out," he urged. "Try to tell us!"

A faltering whisper reached his ear. ". . . said I let him down . . . said . . . too dangerous to live—"

"What's he saying, Jim?" Buck Robertson demanded. "What's he telling you?"

CHAPTER X

Death of a Water Witch

WITH a shake of his head, the Ranger slowly straightened. The lips of Monk Mosen had stilled, and the eyes had taken on the fixed stare of death.

"He didn't quite get it out," he muttered.

A rubber-butted six-gun lay in the pebbled bottom of the wash, where it had skidded away from Mosen's limp fingers. Hatfield picked it up, saw the initial "M" crudely carved into each of the butt plates. He sniffed the barrel, broke open the cylinder for a look at the loads. The gun had not been fired.

"So that's the shape of it!" he grunted. "Mosen wasn't simply stringing t h e Quakers along for the fees he could get out of them. He was working under

orders from somebody—somebody, apparently, who was afraid he might turn informer, so decided to put him out of the way. It's my guess that he was on his way to tell this person that things had gone wrong, and unexpectedly found him waiting here in the trees. They talked—and Mosen got it before he could do any more than haul out his gun."

"But who, Jim?" Buck demanded. "Who killed him?"

"The same man," Hatfield answered, "who's trying to stop the Quakers from finding water, and to keep the railroad from opening up this country. I think if we knew his name, the whole mess would be cleared up at one stroke!"

"Maybe we can pick up a trail, Jim!" Buck said eagerly.

The Ranger shook his head. "Little chance of that, I'm afraid. Monk's killer got a long start. It's out of the question for us to catch up with him, or follow his tracks long, before the wind covers them."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"Right now," Hatfield said, "we're going back to the Quaker settlement and arrange for someone to come here and pick up Mosen's body. After that, Buck, I'm going to teach you how to run a well drill!"

"Me?" exclaimed Buck, aghast. "Aw, no, Jim! I want to stick with you!"

"Sorry, Buck," the Ranger said firmly. "We've got to find water, or it means ruin for everyone involved. And those farmers already have their hands full of work. So I'm going to have to ask you to take over that drill—and keep sinking it until you hit either water, or solid rock the bit won't go through!"

Buck still looked disgruntled, but he submitted without further argument. After all, he was at the age where, next to adventure, nothing appealed more than a chance to tinker with an unfamiliar piece of machinery.

"All right," he said, beginning to grin. "I guess it ought to be sort of fun, at that."

"It will be tough, hard work," Hatfield corrected him. "But I know I can count on you to do it. . . . Well, let's be going!"

They returned to their horses, swung up, and headed them again for the Quaker settlement. . . .

It was late when Hatfield returned alone to camp, and he was tired, both from the long hours in saddle, and from his battle with Monk Mosen. He saw that Goldy was taken care of at the company stable, then walked to the tent office, where he had noticed a light burning.

But Steve Bannister was not there; only the Easterner, Wade Oliver, who was still working at the desk where Hatfield had last seen him, with ledger books piled about him and scratch paper littering the floor. He lifted a haggard glance as the Ranger asked a question, shook his head in reply.

"Haven't seen him, Hatfield. Bannister does his office work in the saddle, so I'm trying to straighten some of these figures out for him." He indicated the spread of work on the table in front of him. "*I* know he's sound, but some of his creditors might not like the way these books are kept. And at least it's one way a man like me can help him."

"That's white of you, Oliver," the Ranger said.

"I suppose you've heard the latest?" the St. Louis man asked.

Hatfield gave him a sharp look. "What now?"

"The hands are beginning to quit. Another of those who were hurt last evening died today, and on top of that someone has started passing the word among these ignorant gandy dancers that the pay is running out, that all they can get by sticking is a bullet in the back. A bunch of them threw down their tools today and walked off the job!"

VASTLY troubled by this news, Hatfield nodded good night after a word or two more, and walked out of the office, wondering where would be the best place to look for Bannister.

He noticed the Crown brand on the shoulder of a saddle horse racked in front of the general mercantile, but thought little of this until he had gone a pace beyond the doorway. It swung open suddenly, and a voice spoke his name. Pausing, Hatfield turned as the foreman, Vern Lawtry, came down the two plank steps.

"I've been hoping for a chance to talk with you, Ranger," said Lawtry.

Jim Hatfield looked at him, in the spill of light from the store window. The fore-

man's patient, pale eyes were light stains against the darkness of his face.

"Well, Lawtry?" Hatfield said. "I'm here to talk to."

"It's about that run-in you had last night, with the Old Man," Vern Lawtry said. "I'm sorry for the way it happened, and for some of the things that were said. But you understand there wasn't much I could do about it—not right then."

Jim Hatfield considered the dimly-seen face of the man, the mild-mannered speech.

"You don't go along with Jubal King's attitude toward the railroad, then?" he asked slowly.

The Crown foreman lifted solid shoulders. "He's the boss—a pretty good boss, too, all things considered. But he's had his own way so long, has got so much in the habit of thinking this Cap Rock country is his own personal kingdom with no room for anyone else, that to cross his trail is a sure way of starting fireworks. It don't make much difference how you try to handle him."

"He was talking pretty tough," the Ranger agreed, noncommittally.

"But he's mostly all bark, and not much bite to him. I wanted to be sure you understood that, Hatfield, and didn't get a false impression. That mouth of his has got him in plenty of trouble, and it will again. But generally what he says don't have anything but wind behind it. Like his threats against the railroad. He's been making loud talk since the day Bannister first set foot up here, but you can see for yourself he's never lifted a hand actually to stop the railroad."

"Hasn't he?" murmured the Ranger. He added, before the foreman could answer, "Was that just talk, last night, about greeting any railroader who came near the ranch with guns?"

"Why, of course it—"

Vern Lawtry stopped short in the middle of a sentence, as something concealed in Hatfield's dry voice struck home to him. Hatfield saw his head jerk back. When he spoke again his tone was altered, a little hardened.

"But naturally, any man who would dare to sneak in on the Crown headquarters in the dark, and maybe put a gunbarrel across the skull of a Crown rider, could expect to run into trouble if he's caught. I wouldn't advise anybody to try that, Hatfield—it wouldn't matter who he was! Or how anxious we are to keep peace with him! Do you understand what I'm saying?"

For a moment, neither moved. Then Hatfield nodded, his dark face unreadable in the thin light.

"Yeah, I think we both understand, Lawtry."

"I kind of think we do!" grunted the Crown foreman.

He turned abruptly and went off with a solid stride. Watching the heavy shape of him melt into the darkness, Jim Hatfield asked himself:

"Now, just what was behind all that? Is he on the level about wanting peace, or only trying to make an impression? He's a deep sort. It's not easy to read those pale eyes of his!"

The Ranger filed that encounter away, for further consideration.

Meanwhile, he still had not located Steve Bannister, but on making further inquiry he learned finally that Bannister, with Riley and a couple of his other men, had pulled out of camp earlier on business. So the Ranger's talk with the railroad man would have to be postponed.

FROWNING over this, he stepped into an alleyway out of the direct flow of gritty wind that scoured the town while he built a smoke and fumbled out a match with which to light it. His hand was poised to scrape the sulphur alight against a siding timber when a sound in the darkness across the way made him pause, head jerking up as he peered into the blackness.

It was a lonely spot where he stood, near the edge of the camp, with little hereabouts except supply sheds. What he had heard—the scrape of a boot on hard earth—might mean nothing, but Hatfield was in a mood to be suspicious. There had been no repetition of the sound, however, so whoever was over there must be making an effort to muffle his footsteps.

Remembering the attempt on his life the night before, Hatfield lifted a gun from leather. But there was no light except that of the stars and he doubted if an enemy could have had him spotted.

After a moment's waiting, he tore the unlighted cigarette from his mouth, tossed it aside as he dropped the match back into his pocket, and then started moving forward again.

He crossed the open street at a sprint, brought up against the corner of a squat, low tool shed. And a scramble of running footsteps told him that his approach had been heard and had given alarm. There was more than one of them laying for him, to judge by the boot-sounds.

Hatfield stepped away from the wall, put his challenge into the clotted shadows to the rear of the shed.

"Hold it! Who's back there?"

His answer was a lancing rope of gun-flame, a bullet humming along the side of the shed. He ducked involuntarily, then tipped up his own gun for a shot. Firing blind, and at that distance, there was little likelihood of making a hit, so after triggering once, he started running in.

The quick beat of hoofs sounded, then, going away from a galloping start. The Lone Wolf hauled up, listening. They were headed south. In a short time they had faded out of hearing.

Starting to wheel back toward the street, Hatfield discovered a door standing open in the side of the shed. Moving toward it, his boot touched something and he leaned down to pick it up. It was a padlock that had been twisted open with a crowbar, and thrown aside.

He got out a match and thumbed it alight. The word "DANGER" painted in red above the jimmied door caught his eye. Stepping into the opening, he held the match just long enough to see the cases of dynamite and kegs of black powder stacked inside, then backed out of the powderhouse, hastily shaking out the flame.

Perplexity creased his dark brow in a scowl as he stood there in the night, considering the meaning of this. Booting the door shut, he turned away and hurried to the street, to swing along it at a fast stride. He stopped beside the first saddled horse he found tied to a hitchrack. Jerking the reins free, he flung himself into the saddle without ceremony. In seconds he had kicked the bronc into a run and was heading after the vanished horsemen.

CHAPTER XI

Dynamite

DELAY in starting pursuit had allowed the mysterious riders to get a good head start, and now Hatfield could hear no sound of hoofbeats against the wide swell of the dark plain. Still he pushed on, making the best guess he could as to the probable direction they had taken. Soon he dropped into a wagon trail leading southward from the camp, and to his right the twin lines of the railroad glinted faintly in the starlight.

At intervals he pulled in to listen for hoof-sound, then went forward again. He had to let his mount take an easier pace, for this wasn't Goldy he was forking and he couldn't ask for the endurance he took for granted from the great sorrel.

After a spell of riding blind, the wind against his face clearly brought him the reassuring ring of steel on stone. He had to hold his commandeered bronc down still more, not wanting to overtake those riders. Instead, he wanted to find out where they were going and on what mysterious mission.

By now he had decided that there must be three of them, at least. And from the easy gait they seemed to be taking he gathered that they were entirely unaware of pursuit.

They rode steadily, an occasional sound informing him that they still were ahead of him. The night grew older; an hour passed. Toward morning there would be a moon, but now there was only the wheeling pattern of the stars overhead.

He had passed the gap in the glimmering strands of Jubal King's south fence, where the rails had pierced it in spite of the warning challenge from Crown. The wagon road beneath him was curving gradually eastward. There was nothing ahead, he knew, but the edge of the Cap Rock rim and Bronco Canyon, where the road and the twin rails on their high trestle snaked a course down to the plains below.

Suddenly a thought jarred home, so sharply that inadvertently he hauled his bronc to a stop with a jerk of his fingers

on the reins. The trestle!

An exclamation broke from him. Thinking then that he suddenly saw the whole shape of the thing, he forgot caution and kicked his horse into a dead run.

The dark ground, blurring past beneath the running hoofs of the mount, began to take on a steep pitch as he entered the head of Bronco Canyon. As he came over a ridge the black maw of the canyon and the intricate skeleton of the trestle stretched below him.

He pulled out of the wagon road, riding straight for the structure. A hoof struck sparks from a steel rail and then he was on the road-bed and racing hard along the ties. Shouts of alarm reached his ears.

In the starlight, little was clear, but he thought he saw movement that would be a cavvy of held saddle horses. And out on the trestle, a couple of men seemed to be working at something. Suddenly, from dead ahead, a gun roared at him.

The Ranger, with his own weapon ready, bored straight in, with reckless daring. The time for caution was past. The trestle leaped nearer at every pounding stride of his horse. The shouts of men, surprised and startled by his unexpected appearance, were strident. Again that gun spoke, this time within bullet range. Jim Hatfield thumbed off an answering shot at random, then almost immediately he saw the dark shape of the gunman, standing on the roadbed. Their guns spoke together, blending their racket and their fire. And the horse between Jim Hatfield's legs went crazy.

The Ranger fought him, but the gun-shy bronc was beyond controlling. He bucked and pitched, squealing, insane with fear. Finally there was nothing to do but drop from saddle and let him go. Landing spread-legged between the rails, Hatfield caught his balance and swiveled to look for the gunslinger.

The fellow was coming, running and shooting. Hatfield aimed at the center of the dark shape and dropped the hammer. The man screamed as the drive of the lead spun him about. Then he went in a rolling spill down the embankment.

HATFIELD went sprinting ahead between the rails.

"Yates is down!" he heard the horse-holder shout. "The snake dropped him!" Then the man's gun started working.

"Hold him, can't you?" yelled one of the two men on the trestle. "We've got the job almost finished!" But even as he yelled he was starting back to add his gun against the Ranger.

Bullets sang close and Hatfield dropped to one knee between the rails, a gun in either hand. Desperately he flung answering lead, trying to knock out the two men who were trying to stop him while their companion finished his work on the trestle. But they had sought cover and he couldn't seem to target the flashes of their guns.

A slug screamed in ricochet off one of the rails beside him. He flipped a quick return shot and thought he heard a grunt of pain through the mingled thunder of the guns, but he hadn't tallied seriously enough to put that man out of the fight.

Then the last man was coming off the trestle at a dead run, shouting:

"All right! Hit leather and let's get out of here!"

At once the firing stopped and the gunmen were scrambling for their horses in the cavvy, leaving their dead companion in the road-bed.

Hatfield leaped to his feet. He could have dropped at least one of them, but there wasn't time or thought to spare for that. His only thought now was to reach that trestle, and he was hardly conscious of the quick burst of hoof-sound as the trio hit their saddles and spurred away as fast as their horses could get into motion.

Racing for the trestle he had moved out onto the wooden structure before clear reason warned him of the hopelessness and the risk in what he was doing. It was plain now that an explosive had been planted out there, but there was no way of knowing just where the charge had been placed, and from the outlaws' haste to get away he judged the fuse must be plenty short. He had not a chance in a thousand of averting an explosion.

As, reluctantly, he turned back to seek his own safety, the whole world seemed to let go in a great, roaring blast of flame and thunder. The trestle lifted convulsively under him, the flash of the dynamite lighted up the darkness.

Then a wave of concussion struck Hat-

field, took him off his feet, slammed him hard against the broken timbers and the twisted iron rails. And consciousness left him. . . .

A LIGHT stabbing his eyes, and a throbbing pain that seemed fairly to split his skull wide open, marked Jim Hatfield's awakening. He squinted, twisting his head to escape the probing rays, and at the dull pound of agony that this movement caused a groan broke from him, and he came fully aware of his surroundings.

He was astonished to find himself still alive, and not caught in the tangle of the trestle wreckage. Instead, he lay on a comfortable bed with a canvas tent roof overhead. He must be in the railroad camp dispensary.

A shadow fell across his face and he glanced up to see the old medico who was in charge looking down at him.

"Move that lantern," the doctor ordered somebody. "It's shining right in his eyes." And as Hatfield mumbled his thanks, the old doctor went on, "Well, son, how do you feel?"

"Like a mountain fell on me," the Ranger grunted.

"It almost did! When that trestle went out, you were lucky that the upper end held and didn't collapse with you completely. You conked your noggin on one of the rails, bad enough to lay you out, but otherwise you're not hurt."

"What am I doing here?" Hatfield wanted to know.

"We brought you in," the voice of Steve Bannister answered, as the railroad builder moved into his line of vision. His good-looking face showed the weight of worry. "Riley and I happened to be in the vicinity and heard the dynamite blast. We burned leather getting to the trestle, naturally—and we found you."

"Did you find any dead?" the Ranger asked. "I was pretty sure that I'd dropped one of them."

"Yes," said Bannister. "Lying beside the embankment. He was one of the rimrock crowd, we judge. There were caps and fuses in his pocket, so it wasn't hard to figure out what had happened to the trestle. We haven't been able to figure, though, how you came to be on hand."

Briefly, Hatfield related his discovery of the prowlers at the powder shed and how he had trailed them to the scene of the trestle-blowing. It was tiring for him to talk, but the first nausea was passing, and the brassy taste in his mouth was not as bad as it had been when he had regained consciousness.

He was fumbling at his shirt pocket for smoking materials when Bannister, seeing what he was after, quietly took the tobacco and papers from him, rolled the cigarette, and stuck it between his lips.

"Thanks," Hatfield mumbled, dragging against the match flame the railroad man held to the end of the quirly. "A few puffs of this ought to put me on my feet!"

"You better stay where you are," the doctor warned sharply. "Your system has had a bad shock. You need rest."

"I've been resting. And there's things waiting to be done!"

"There's more to be done than you know about yet, Hatfield!" Steve Bannister said.

Something in his tone made Hatfield spear the man with a sharp look. "What do you mean?" he snapped. "More bad news?"

"Waiting for us"—Bannister nodded—"when we came back to camp after finding you. Look in that next bunk."

The Ranger turned his head. At first he did not even recognize the figure on the iron bed next to his own, the man's face was so hidden by bandages. There was a swath of white cloth wrapped tightly about his chest. But the Ranger knew the square-cut gray beard, and the one blue eye that peered at him from the bandaged face.

"Adam Hilsing!" he exclaimed.

Ignoring the doctor's warning, Hatfield was pulled to a sitting position by this, swinging his legs over the side of the cot. He had to hold on to the ironwork with both hands for an instant, until the dizzy aching of his head eased.

"What in the world happened to him?" he demanded.

"Our red-headed friend and his crew paid the Quaker settlement a visit this afternoon," Bannister told him. "They singled Hilsing out for an object lesson to the others."

Jim Hatfield had sighted Buck Robert-

son, by now, standing at the head of the old man's cot. He shot the young fellow a frowning look.

"And where were you, Buck? Didn't I leave you to look out for things?"

Before the freckled Buck could reply, Adam Hilsing himself cut in.

"Thee mustn't blame the boy. There were too many of them."

"I'm sorry, Jim," Buck said contritely. "They came in on us unawares. I wasn't wearing my gun—had it in the wagon beside the drill rig. And when I got it out, Mr. Hilsing wouldn't let me use it!"

"Not for our sake could we have let him endanger his immortal soul by killings," Adam Hilsing explained gently. He added, in a practical tone, "Besides, he had the only gun against a dozen of the raiders. It would have been suicide to have tried standing up against them."

CHAPTER XII

Council of War

YOUNG Buck Robertson's voice trembled with fury as, no longer able to restrain himself, he burst out with his version of the raid on the Quaker settlement.

"They held guns on us so we couldn't do anything!" he said angrily. "And the redhead used his fists on Mr. Hilsing. His boots, too! Doc says there's a couple of busted ribs, but maybe no worse than that."

"The skunk!" Jim Hatfield gritted. "The score I've got to settle with Red Ruffin is mounting fast. And I'll do it before this fight is over!"

"I don't know, Hatfield," said Bannister. "The fight may already be over, as far as any of us are concerned. You haven't heard all of it. Tell him, Buck!"

The Ranger's head swiveled, his glance stabbing at Buck.

"What?"

"They smashed the drill!" Buck said heavily.

The shock of this news was like a physical blow. When the Ranger recovered his breath, he demanded:

"How badly?"

"Hard to tell yet," Bannister answered. "I've already sent a couple of my best mechanics up to look it over and see what the chances are of fixing it. But, one way or the other, I've got a feeling that this time we're licked!"

It was plain that he believed that. For once, in a brilliant career of two-fisted railroading, the Steve Bannister who had battered his way through every kind of obstacle was ready to admit that he had been bested at last. And Jim Hatfield's jaw muscles bunched hard as he read defeat in Steve's dark, clouded features.

"What do you mean, licked?" he demanded.

"Even if we fix the drill and Hilsing's people manage to go on down to water," Bannister said dully, "the blowing of the trestle cripples us. Every rail we lay has to come over that trestle, and we can never get it repaired in time to finish this section of the road before the deadline!"

Silence lay upon the group, and every glance turned to Jim Hatfield. It was almost as though each of them thought that if there were any solution to this predicament, he would be able to supply it. The Lone Wolf plucked the cigarette from his mouth, thoughtfully stubbed it out against the ironwork of the cot.

"You must have some supply of steel on hand, though," he said s l o w l y. "Enough, maybe, to keep a track crew busy, while the trestle is being repaired?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Bannister admitted. "But what of that? Part of the men have already walked out on me. And those who are left aren't enough to do both jobs at once."

"Promise them double pay—anything—to hold them. And we'll have to find more."

"Where—in this empty Cap Rock country?" Bannister demanded shortly. "And in the time we have? Maybe Jubal King's cowpunchers will turn gandy dancers and help build the road!" His voice was bitter with sarcasm.

Jim Hatfield shook his head. "Hardly that! You're missing the most obvious bet!" He swung his glance toward the Quaker leader. "How about it, Hilsing? This railroad means a lot to your people. It's more important at the moment, I figure, than anything you're doing on your land. Would they pitch in and do

what they can to help push it through under the deadline?"

The challenge brought the old man up off his cot. "Why—why, I don't see why not!" he exclaimed, as the suddenness of the suggestion wore off. "We know nothing of railroad work but under supervision there's no reason we couldn't lay a few miles of track."

"Good!" Hatfield turned back to Bannister. "There's the answer, Steve. Split your crews, put the Quakers in with regular hands who can help teach them how the work is done. Take every possible short-cut in order to get a line laid in to the settlement within your time limit—and don't worry too much, for the present, about leveling the road-bed, or sinking the ties and getting them spaced properly. All that can be redone later, after you've reached your destination and satisfied the needs of your grant-in-aid from the state government. Right now, what matters is laying down rails in some form that a locomotive with a couple of cars attached can negotiate!"

STEVE BANNISTER was beginning to catch fire from the Ranger's enthusiasm.

"We'll do it!" he cried. "We'll fight as long as there's anything left to fight for. That is, Mr. Hilsing, if you can guarantee that your men will throw in with us?"

The Quaker was already on his feet. "I'm going after them now," he said. "I'll have them here tomorrow morning sure, ready for work."

"Wait!" the doctor exclaimed. "You're in no shape to sit a saddle! You've got a couple of cracked ribs, man!"

"I'll go the same way I was brought here," declared Hilsing. "In a buckboard. And I'll be starting now because it will likely be an all-night trip and if we're going to do this job there's no time to be lost getting at it!"

"I'll handle the horses, Mr. Hilsing," Buck Robertson broke in quickly, "and we'll take it real easy. Get ready, while I see about hitching up."

"And, Buck!" Jim Hatfield called as his aide started to hurry out of the tent. "When you get there, check with those mechanics who are working on the drill. Find out if they see any hope of fixing it. If there are broken parts we can put in an order for, make up a list of them."

"Sure thing, Jim."

Buck hurried away. Presently old Hilsing, despite the doctor's protests, was dressed and ready to leave.

"You'll take care of yourself, won't you?" Steve Bannister said anxiously. "I can't help thinking it's on account of me that you took that beating from Ruffin. I don't want to be the cause of any further suffering to you or your people."

The Quaker leader gave him a warm smile, that must have stretched the plasters on his bruised face painfully.

"Thee has no call to speak so. It is as the Ranger said—we're all in this together. If one loses, we all lose!"

When he was gone, Steve Bannister looked after him, still with a troubled scowl.

"One thing about this bothers me, Hatfield!" he said glumly. "Our enemies aren't going to quit, just because the double load they threw at us tonight didn't manage to stop us. They'll send Red Ruffin and his crew to hit where it will do the greatest damage, and you know we can't expect Adam Hilsing's people to fight."

"That's all right," said Jim Hatfield. "It's enough that they agree to work for us. When the time arrives, we can do the fighting!"

And so the A & C pushed ahead, sparked by the fire of Jim Hatfield's leadership.

The Quakers responded, to a man, and came pouring into the railroad camp to offer their services and be put to work. Steve Bannister quickly had them assigned to work crews and issued tools and, side by side with the cursing, boisterous Irish gandy dancers the sober, quiet Quakers instantly fell into the rhythm of this unfamiliar labor.

The best construction workers had been pooled for the important emergency job of repairing the blasted trestle, and Jim Hatfield asked for and received Bannister's permission to take this over. His knowledge of engineering was sufficient for him to oversee the restoring of the ruined structure, and in this way he could free Bannister's attention to the overall supervision of the whole job.

The Ranger set up camp at the head of Bronco Canyon with his crew, and Buck Robertson joined him there. A lot needed

to be done, and quickly, if the broken trestle was not to be a bottleneck in the flow of supplies to the rail crews.

Much of the timber work had been reduced to blackened splinters, and the rails across the structure were twisted grotesquely. These had first to be ripped out and replaced from the spare materials that had been left stacked nearby in case repairs were needed. It was sweaty, dangerous work, with Hatfield and his men crawling like beetles over the high structure. Moreover, it had to be done fast and well.

THEY got it done by sticking to the job day and night, by shifts, and working partly in the eerie flicker of kerosene flares. Finally the first load of rails came up across the repaired trestle. Leaving an adequate guard this time to forestall any second attempt to destroy it, Hatfield and Buck and the crew pulled out and headed back to the camp at Cap Rock.

Here Hatfield found Steve Bannister slumped for a moment of rest behind the desk in the tent office, his eyes red-rimmed, his face drawn and stubble-bearded, a dust-coated hat on his knees. He listened to Hatfield's report of the completion of the trestle job with satisfaction, but he couldn't keep a beaten tone out of his voice.

"That's fine, Jim—fine! I don't know how I'd have gotten the job done without you. But"—his shoulders lifted tiredly—"it doesn't look like there's much hope of meeting the deadline Friday."

Hatfield frowned. "More raids?"

"No, it's been quiet enough—too quiet! I've been using armed scouts to bring warning of trouble before trouble has time to hit, and maybe that rimrock crowd figures it's too dangerous. Or maybe they figure that, left alone, we'll lick ourselves!"

"That's no way to think, Steve," Hatfield said sharply.

Bannister shook his head. "There's no use fooling ourselves about it. We're short-handed. The Quakers aren't enough to make the difference. They work their hearts out on the job, but it's work they don't understand. And splitting what experienced crews I had left, in order to repair the trestle, has thrown us just far enough behind schedule that the four days left simply won't be enough to give us a chance to finish!"

"It's as bad as that?"

Bannister got to his feet, took his hat and dragged it on.

"But we'll keep fighting until the last chip is in the pot!" he said grimly.

He was stooping to clear the tent-flap when Jim Hatfield stopped him with a sudden question.

"Where's the closest telegraph key?"

Bannister turned. "There's none close," he told the Ranger, with a curious look. "Rimrock Station, down below, is a two-day ride—might be done in less, if a rider made a short-cut down over the wall. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know yet for sure," Hatfield told him. "I was just thinking of something."

But the railroad man had hardly left the tent when Hatfield was seated at the desk, at work with pencil and paper. Finished, he handed what he had written to Buck.

[*Turn page*]

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"A job for you, Buck—a long, hard ride. Get down there and get this on the wire, and bring back an answer as quickly as you can manage it!"

Buck read the message. The eyes in his freckled face widened.

"Gosh, Jim! Do you think Captain McDowell can manage this?"

"If any man can," Hatfield said positively. "He knows a lot of important people in Austin. It all depends on how much they want this railroad finished. And I'm gambling that they do want it." He stood up. "It's a big thing I'm asking of you, Buck. I can't make the ride myself. I'm needed here too much. Take trail grub with you, and an extra horse, because there'll be no remounts between here and Rimrock Station."

"Sure, Jim!" cried Buck, tingling with excitement and with pride in the Lone Wolf's trust. "Don't worry—I'll see the message through. You just get to work and build this railroad."

CHAPTER XIII

Rim Rock Rendezvous

FORKING Old Heart 7, and with a chunky dun mare trailing at the end of a lead rope, Buck Robertson rode eastward across the level plains. Jim Hatfield's message was carefully buttoned into a pocket of his shirt.

He had already passed the Crown headquarters, giving the buildings a wide berth, since he had not forgotten Jubal King's defiant warning to interlopers crossing this land. Buck was considerably relieved when the dark smudge on the horizon which was the ranch layout dropped away behind the flat rim of the prairie. But even after this he kept his eyes open against a surprise encounter with any of King's riders.

That was how he happened to spot the dust stain in the sky ahead and to the right of his course. He reined in sharply to scowl at it, studying the dark moving figures that had raised that dust. They were horsemen, moving his way.

He couldn't be sure that they had him spotted, but neither could he take chances. At once he was digging his heels into the gray and sending it off in a spurt of speed, the led mare clattering after, heading toward a dry wash at his left.

The wash led at an angle north and east, taking him off the course he wanted to travel. He was chagrined at this, but had no choice except to follow it. He set his horses down the throat of the rocky declivity, bending low over the saddle horn so that he would make as little shape as possible above the willows and scrub growth that lined the stream bed.

He kept on like this for some twenty minutes before he ventured to halt and look back, hunting pursuit. Except for the blowing of the horses and the nearby warbling of a meadow lark in the curly buffalo grass, no sound broke the warm stillness. Coming down from saddle, Buck climbed the eroded side of the draw and, parting the brush, scanned the sun-smitten distances.

No sign of the riders. Either he had discouraged them from taking after him, or they had not seen him in the first place.

Thoughtfully Buck returned to his horses and started on down the draw. The land was growing more irregular, and he knew he must be getting into the country along the rim. By being driven off his course, he had missed a chance at making the shortest crossing of the Cap Rock wall, but now he might as well keep on the way he was going, find the nearest descent, then try to make up lost time when he reached the level land below the wall.

That was how he was figuring as he rounded a hump of eroded limestone, and saw the faint trace of wagon wheels crossing a flat stretch just ahead of him.

"Well, now, what in the name of—"

Buck reined in, tilting his hat forward to dig into his thatch of straw-yellow hair with blunt fingers.

"This beats me," he muttered to Old Heart 7. "Who would drive wagons through this stretch of country? They've laid their tracks here more than once, but not often enough for it to be any usual route of travel."

Still puzzling over it, he nudged his horses forward, starting down the slanted incline toward the wagon trail. Beyond were broken rock shapes, eroded

limestone ledges and pinnacles.

He had not quite left the cover of brush and rocks when he was sawing the reins in a frantic effort to turn the gray and get back again into hiding. The creaking of wagon timbers and plop of hoofs sounded louder now, along that uneven double track below him.

Peering from hiding, Buck watched and saw the rig come into view—a big, canvas-topped freight outfit. It rumbled past, lurching over the poor going, and Buck got a good look at the man on the wide seat. It was Grady Slocum, the freight boss.

Buck held back, out of sight, as the wagon rolled away from him. But a hundred yards farther on, the rig pulled to a halt. Slocum appeared in the rear bow of the wagon, hauling something—a box. He got it hoisted onto the tail-gate and heaved it over into the trail. Leaning out, he lifted his hand in a gesture.

FOR the first time then, Buck saw that three men had appeared out of the rocks. Two of them went scrambling down to pick up the box and return, carrying it between them. The third merely stood watching, and it was he who returned Grady Slocum's salute.

Buck could see him plainly, silhouetted there atop a broken pile of rock. He could see the long red hair that hung to his shoulders. Instinctively Buck's hand groped for the handle of his holstered six-gun, then he caught himself and shoved the weapon back into place.

"Easy!" he muttered, between tight, set lips.

Almost as silently as they had appeared, the outlaws dropped back from sight into the fastness of the rocks. Grady Slocum's wagon got into motion again. Soon it was gone and all sound of it had faded from the air. And Buck waited there beside his horses, faced with a terrible choice.

Somewhere beyond those rocks must be Red Ruffin's outlaw hideout. And he had witnessed the freighter, Grady Slocum himself, delivering supplies to it in one of his own wagons. Surely Jim Hatfield should be told about this, for the railroad was dependent on Slocum's wagons for the ties it needed. And here was proof that the freighter was working with the railroad's enemies.

On the other hand, this message had to reach the telegraph station, without delay!

It was a terrific dilemma, but in the end it could have but one answer. Jim Hatfield had taught his protégé well the meaning of and the need for discipline. He could do nothing except follow orders, get on to Rimrock Station, and let nothing delay him.

But as he turned back to the gray and felt for his stirrup, Buck Robertson could only hope, without real conviction, that disaster would not come to the A & C through lack of the warning he might have given. . . .

Back at the railroad camp, as with every hour the deadline drew nearer, men poured out their strength and their courage in a last desperate try to finish the job in time. The day preceding the deadline a Senatorial committee arrived from Austin, to adjudicate the meeting of the deadline. But that evening, Steve Bannister faced Hatfield, Riley, and Wade Oliver in his tent office with a discouraging report.

"There's no use fooling ourselves," he repeated heavily. "Every spare hand, from the chief surveyor down to the cooks, is out there wrestling rails and spikes, by torchlight. And yet we're at least forty hours away from a finish to the job. We'll never get done within the time limit, tomorrow!"

The listening men exchanged serious glances. Wade Oliver ran a hand across his bald scalp. The man from St. Louis had changed much in these past weeks. He had become as sun-browned as any of them, and his body was losing some of its paunchy softness. But it was he who showed signs of breaking, and he voiced his conclusion of despair.

"Then what's the use of going on?" he sighed. "If we're already licked. Where's the sense in a man torturing his body if he has no chance of winning?"

"It's no time to quit," Jim Hatfield contradicted him, putting his voice flatly into the worried silence. "When you're this close to the goal, a technicality like a time limit shouldn't keep us from pushing through."

He saw their eyes on him. Riley, the big straw boss, said slowly:

"I think you got something on your mind, Hatfield! Some card you're holding in reserve."

"If I have," said the Ranger, "let me keep it covered a bit longer. I wouldn't want to raise false hopes, with promises I can't pay off on. But Buck Robertson should be back some time tomorrow, with the answer to a telegram I sent that could make a difference. And until it gets here, I hope you'll take my word for it that this fight still isn't ended."

"That's good enough for me!" cried Steve Bannister. "As long as any man is ready to fight alongside me, I'm certainly not one to lay down and quit!"

TOWARD morning, a work train pulled out for end-of-track, with a relief crew on board. Jim Hatfield found a place for Goldy and loaded him into one of the box cars, then climbed into the caboose as the train rolled out. He had an odd feeling that this day would not pass without a showdown with the rimrock crowd.

Dog-tired, he stretched out on one of the bunks in the caboose, but was too restless to sleep. The timbers of the car creaked, the lantern swayed on its ceiling hook as they rocked along the hastily leveled road-bed. In another of the bunks, Wade Oliver lay snoring. Steve Bannister was forward in the cab of the engine, anxiously checking the condition of the road as the train pulled slowly over it.

Sunrise was rioting in the sky when they reached their destination. Hatfield swung stiffly down in the chill gray of dawn. Flares lighted the scene, where the fresh shift was piling out to take over from the tired night crew. A few lights, just visible, marked the Quaker settlement.

A buckboard rolled to a stop near him and he recognized Adam Hilsing and his daughter, Amy, on the seat. Hatfield walked over to greet them. In the back of the rig were steaming boilers.

"We brought hot coffee for the workmen," the girl explained. "Any way that we can help—"

"We have news, too," her father added. "The men who have been working on the drill say that the repairs are finished and that they can start going down immediately. It could be a matter of hours!"

"Good!" said Hatfield. "We'll have to find Bannister and tell him. He'll be glad of anything encouraging!"

He dropped the anchor ring, helped them both down from the buckboard. Hilsing was as yet able to get around only stiffly and by sheer strength of nerve, his body not fully recovered from the beating he had so recently taken.

They moved through the bustle of the workings, beside the cars.

"I think we'll find him up here at the engine," Jim Hatfield was saying, when the spang of a bullet striking the iron rails stacked upon a flat car gave the first warning of attack.

"Hunt cover!" cried Hatfield, to the girl and her father. "This is the big one!"

He was already shipping his matched Colts, with a reflex movement of his powerful hands.

"Hilsing," he barked, "tell your men to keep low and out of the way, so that Bannister's crew can fight."

"No!" cried the Quaker, with sudden decision, a hand on Hatfield's arm. "Our creed does not permit us to fight, but there are other ways we can help. We can load guns!"

"Good man!" the Ranger applauded.

Then he had too many things on his mind to think further of the Hilsings.

The raiders, striking out of the uncertain dawnlight and without any warning, had hit hard enough to drive almost through the defense and scatter it. Horsemen swept in upon the end-of-track workings, leaning from saddle to hurl fire and lead at the track crew which, belatedly, had grabbed weapons to stand them off.

A fury of yells and gunfire and squealing horses and pounding hoofs filled the air, as Jim Hatfield hurried forward through streaking dust and weird torchlight toward the nearest point of trouble.

Then the twin guns were bucking against his palms, as he found targets and hurled his bullets at them. It was impossible to count the enemy forces, but they were large. And some of them, he noticed, were masked.

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CHAPTER XIV

Attack

ONE of the raiders was spilled from leather by a Ranger bullet, and landed in a rolling sprawl. The riderless horse went by the Lone Wolf so close that he had to step aside as it ran blindly past, its eyeballs shining with fear. An empty stirrup grazed him. Into the streaking dust he triggered, again and again, his targets elusive in the poor light.

A horse crashed down, pinning its rider. As the tide of battle swept back and forth across the camp, Hatfield thought but couldn't be sure that the defenders, standing their ground, were turning back the first wave of the attacking forces. But it was hard to be sure of anything in this fight.

Looking about for a better vantage point, he spotted Steve Bannister leaning from the cab of the wood-burner, firing down into the turmoil of dust and confusion and powdersmoke. This gave him an idea. Not far from where he stood was the iron ladder climbing the side of the tender. He whirled toward it, caught at the rungs and quickly scaled the iron wall and vaulted over onto the piled cordwood which fed the boilers.

Here, free of the stinging dust, he could much better judge his shots and distinguish friend from foe. Gunmetal turned hot against his palms as he shot the six-guns dry, loaded and shot again, making his bullets count. If only the railroaders' ammunition could hold out—

Behind him, a harsh voice gritted: "Drop your guns, Ranger! Drop 'em over the side, and turn around!"

Something in the tone warned him there was no use resisting. Hatfield opened his hands, let the guns fall from them to the ground below. Then, scrambling about on the loose pile of wood, he found himself looking into the face of the outlaw, Red Ruffin.

Ruffin had left saddle and climbed the opposite side of the car. He stood now on the top rung of the ladder, a smoking gun leveled at the Lone Wolf, his shoulder-length rusty hair whipping in the dawn wind. There was hoarse triumph in his voice as he snarled:

"This is a chance I hadn't counted on, Hatfield—to settle old scores with you, personal! Whatever else comes of this fight, I'll see that *you* won't come through it alive!"

There was only one desperate chance, and Hatfield took it. As the outlaw's gun lifted for the shot that would kill him in cold blood, the Lone Wolf shifted his weight and the precarious footing of cord-wood lengths began to roll under him. As though to catch his balance, he stabbed a hand into the wood pile—brought it up clutching one of the heavy sticks, and let fly with it.

As it flipped end for end toward the outlaw, Hatfield was already diving forward. He heard Ruffin's squawk as he tried to dodge the stick. Then, in a clatter of shifting cordwood, the Ranger had waded in and his outstretched hands caught at the outlaw, pawed for a hold on that gun wrist.

Ruffin had the advantage of sure footing. As he jerked and fought to free himself, he sent Hatfield floundering. But the Ranger had a grip now on that hard, bony wrist and he would not let loose.

The outlaw's other fist rained blows upon him, smashed into his face, into the back of his neck as he averted his head to escape them. Desperately he tried for a footing but the cordwood merely rolled away beneath his floundering boots. He could not fight back, he could do no more than cling to that gun arm and soak up the blows of Ruffin's fist. They were already weakening him.

Then his hand closed on a length of wood and with an effort he jabbed upward with it, felt flesh and bone yield to its drive. The captured wrist went limp and a dead weight dragged it from his grasp. Catching hold of the tender's iron side, Hatfield pulled himself up in time to see Ruffin's limp shape hit the ground below.

Dimly, his head still ringing to the punishing blows he had absorbed, he thought he heard an outlaw cry:

"Hey! Red's down! Red got it!"

Then, throwing off a momentary shakiness, he put a leg across the side and went down the ladder. Red Ruffin lay on his back, with a bloody mess where his face had been.

SEEMINGLY from nowhere, Buck Robertson was at the Ranger's side. There was a smear of powdersmoke across the aide's excited face, and a smoking gun was in his hand. Wade Oliver was close behind him, panting.

"You got Red!" Buck shouted.

"When did you show up?" Hatfield demanded.

"Just now! I brought Captain McDowell's answer to your wire. It's right here!"

He started to fumble in a pocket.

"Never mind!" Hatfield exclaimed. "What does he say? Could it be done?"

"No, Jim," said Buck, and Hatfield's heart sank. "Legally, he says, there's no way that deadline could be extended—not even by the legislature itself."

"I see," said Hatfield grimly. "Well, it was a try anyway. And thanks a lot, Buck, for making the ride."

Only then did he catch the grin on Buck's freckled face.

"You didn't let me finish. They can't push the deadline back, but McDowell says there's nothing in the rules to keep the legislature from stopping the clock for a while. And that's just what he's got their promise to do, until they hear from us that the railroad is finished!"

Slowly, as this sank in, Hatfield's grin spread to match Buck Robertson's own.

"Then that does it!" he cried. "Buck, that means we win! But right now, there's snakes that need stomping!"

"Wait, Jim!" said Buck, as he started to move away. "There's something more I haven't told you. About Grady Slocum."

"Save it! Find Steve Bannister, and give him this news, you'll find him in the engine cab."

Then the Ranger was gone, ducking between the cars to retrieve the guns that he had been forced to drop over the far side of the tender. He located them, snatched them up with a quick look to see that they weren't damaged. He glanced hurriedly about to discover where he and his guns were most needed.

The fight was still raging, but it was not the mad scramble it had been. The enemy had been pushed back, and the railroaders had been able to form a line of defense behind piles of supplies. They were holding their own, more than holding it. For in the strengthening light of dawn, Hatfield could see that some of the attacking force were already breaking away, turning their horses and galloping off across the shadowed plains where the mist was rising.

He knew what that meant. Word had been passed among the raiders that their leader, Red Ruffin, was dead. It wasn't surprising they would turn tail now, especially after the unexpectedly stiff resistance they had met. There was no reason left for them to fight.

Jim Hatfield was sprinting forward, past the front of the train, when he heard Steve Bannister calling him and turned back. Steve was swinging down the iron steps of the engine cab, flourishing a gun.

"We're driving 'em back!" he yelled. "Hatfield, from what Buck says, there's nothing can stop us from finishing this road—"

His voice broke off. His face twisted incongruously, and to the jerk of a bullet Steve Bannister jack-knifed slowly and went tumbling off the last iron step to the ground below. Past his falling body, Jim Hatfield glimpsed the man who stood, with smoking gun, at the corner of a flat car, twenty feet further along the train.

A glimpse, only. Before he could so much as lift a gun to squeeze off a retaliatory shot, the man had ducked from sight between the cars. But not before the Lone Wolf had recognized him.

WADE OLIVER! With that sudden recognition of the man, like the turning of a kaleidoscope, all the strange facets of this business slipped into place to form a clear pattern in Jim Hatfield's stunned mind, even as he went hurtling toward Bannister's fallen shape. He paused for an instant only, just long enough to turn the railroad builder's body over and fumble for a heartbeat. Blood was flowing from the bullet crease that Oliver's traitorous shot had put in the side of Steve's head, but Bannister still lived.

Buck Robertson came stumbling down the iron steps from the engine, horror on his face.

"Take care of him, Buck," Hatfield snapped. "Find Amy Hilsing, if you can, to help. I'll get the skunk who did this!"

"Let me go with you, Jim!" pleaded Buck.

"No! Steve Bannister needs you worse!"

(Turn to page 52)

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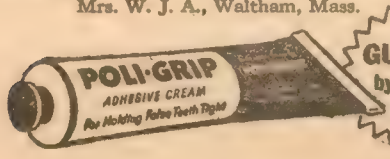

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Before Buck could argue the matter, Hatfield was gone at a run in the wake of the vanished Wade Oliver. He ducked between the cars of the train, hunted sight of the backshooter—and saw him.

Oliver had caught up one of the outlaws' riderless horses and, hurling himself into saddle, was spurring hard to head away from that scene of battle. Hatfield did not hesitate. The railroad men had the upper hand now and the attackers were fleeing, leaving the defenders victorious and holding the field. He went directly to the box car where Goldy waited for him, already saddled.

He got the big door slid open, and at his whistle the great sorrel took the jump to the ground. "Trail, Goldy!" cried the Lone Wolf, as he leaped to saddle, and the sorrel was off at a running start.

It was not the Ranger's intention, however, to overtake Wade Oliver, even though Goldy could easily have outrun the bronc the man had grabbed. Hatfield had a feeling that it would serve him to better purpose if he let Oliver go, keeping track of him but waiting to see where he was bound in such haste. Although he believed he already knew.

He held back, therefore, letting Oliver set the pace, and using every means of concealment that this flat land afforded. After Oliver's mad dash to put distance between himself and the fighting at end-of-track, he settled down to an easy gait. Time dragged out now as, apparently unmindful of pursuit, he pushed steadily southward. The sun climbed into the sky, bringing its dry heat. Long before the Crown headquarters showed ahead, Jim Hatfield realized that his guess had been right. The Crown was Oliver's destination. Wade Oliver rode directly in, while Hatfield reined up at a distance to watch. The buildings seemed deserted, and there were no horses in the corrals. He remembered the masked men who had swelled the ranks of Red Ruffin's rimrock crew. That could explain the absence of the Crown riders from the ranch.

The door of the ranchhouse opened and Jubal King stepped out to greet the rider who reined up. They talked a moment, then Oliver swung down and left the reins of his tired bronc trailing while he followed the white-haired Crown boss inside. And Jim Hatfield, as he had done on another occasion, began moving cautiously in on the ranch buildings.

DISMOUNTING under the drooping shadow of a lone cottonwood, he went ahead on foot, at a crouching run, keeping a close watch on the windows of the house to make sure he was not observed. He judged, however, that the two men inside had so much to talk about that they would not think to watch the yard, and such seemed to be the case. For presently he was flattened against the wall of the building, close to an open window, where he could hear their voices plainly in earnest confab.

"I tell you, we've lost the gamble!" Wade Oliver was saying, in a voice of black despair. "Thanks to that Ranger! I knew he would be poison, from the moment he showed up. I tried to kill him that first night, in camp, but missed my chance at him. And now he's ruined everything. Bannister was nearly ready to quit, but Hatfield kept him fighting. He broke Monk Mosen down so I had to kill the man to keep his mouth shut. He pushed that railroad through, and even had the deadline extended. I still could have won, with Bannister dead. But by the unluckiest of chances, Hatfield again —curse his soul!—saw me fire the shot. There was no choice after that but to run!"

Jubal King's booming voice sounded. "And you leave the Crown to hold the sack! We could have fought Bannister our own way, and kept him off our range. Instead, we let you talk us into trying your methods—and lost."

"Your way would have lost, too," Oliver reminded him harshly. "You could never have held a barricade of guns across your south fence. Vern Lawtry told you that much." He looked around. "By the way, where is Lawtry?"

"Why, I don't know." Jubal King sounded puzzled. "He was here—rode in ten minutes ahead of you. Must have gone out the back way."

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CHAPTER XV

Showdown

KNOWING somehow that it was already too late, Jim Hatfield whirled. There, at the rear corner of the house, the Crown foreman stood on braced legs, a six-gun pointed squarely at the Ranger. The dust of hard riding was on him, and a smear of blood across one cheek where a bullet must have grazed him during the fight at end-of-track. His neckerchief, that he had worn across his face for a mask, was bloody from it, too.

"All right, fellow!" grunted the pale-eyed foreman. "Just hold it where you are. Don't try for either of those guns!"

Hatfield was caught, and he knew it. He stood like that while Lawtry strode forward, rammed the muzzle of his weapon hard against the lawman's lean middle, then deftly plucked the twin Colts from Hatfield's holsters, holding them both in his free hand.

"I watched you sneaking up here," he said, a gloating gleam in the pale eyes which Hatfield saw now were cruel and predatory. "You did it once before and got away with it, but not this time . . . Turn around, and walk into the house!"

Wordlessly, the Ranger obeyed the menace of the drawn gun.

Inside the roughly furnished, two-roomed ranch house, Jubal King and Wade Oliver blundered to their feet with ludicrous expressions on their faces as Lawtry and his prisoner entered.

"Don't you ever watch your backtrail, Oliver?" Lawtry sneered. "This Ranger followed you all the way down from end-of-track!"

But Wade Oliver was too elated at this unhoped-for turn to rise to the baiting.

"You realize what this means, don't you?" he cried, as soon as he found his voice. "It means we win after all! I'm sure no one but Hatfield saw me shoot Bannister, and now this Ranger will never testify against me! He's played the 'Lone Wolf' once too often!"

"Don't go too fast!" Jim Hatfield told him coldly. "You can't cancel out one killing with another."

"Sit down and shut up!" Vern Lawtry snarled.

The Ranger found himself shoved into a chair. Bleakly he watched the foreman move over and deposit his two captured six-guns on a heavy table in the middle of the room. Looking from one to another of his captors he knew that the promise of death had never lain heavier upon him than it did at this moment. But it couldn't stop his tongue.

"King and Lawtry, and Oliver!" he taunted. "So this is the triumvirate that broke the A and C! I suppose it was the Crown's job to handle the dirty end of the stick—hire Red Ruffin's outlaws, and give them their orders. While Wade Oliver was busy working Bannister into a spot with his creditors, so that when he failed to make the deadline Oliver could take over the railroad himself . . . King, now I understand why you stood by and let the railroad build clear across the Crown, and let Bannister be given all that rangeland of yours as a grant-in-aid. The payoff comes now that Oliver is in control. I suppose it's all arranged that he'll sell that land back to you, at a penny or two on the acre, so, for almost nothing, you'll at least get clear legal title to the land you've been grazing all these years without right!"

Jubal King was scowling at him, eyes fierce beneath the shaggy white brows. "And a pretty good arrangement, ain't it?"

"From your viewpoint, yes," said Hatfield, looking straight back at him. "But what will you do with that railroad that runs across your land?"

"What'll I do with it?" The old rancher's veined right hand lifted and tightened into a clawlike fist. "I'll rip it out—every mile of rail and every tie! I'll tear up that blasted steel and there'll be no sign left that it ever fouled my range!" His booming voice trembled with wrath.

"Not quite so fast, King!" Wade Oliver said. "That's my railroad that you're talking about!"

The old man turned a blank, uncomprehending look upon the man from the city. "What are you saying?"

AND Jim Hatfield, seeing the one desperate break he had not dared to hope for, seized upon it.

"That's right, King," he said quietly. "You're going a little fast. Or, rather, Wade Oliver is way ahead of you! What do you suppose he cares about your cattle empire? He owns a railroad now, and he's got sense enough to see the future in it. But not quite the same future Steve Bannister was working for. You know what's in his head? He's going to run those Quakers out, bring in the water himself, and sell farmland here on the Cap Rock! Can't you figure it out for yourself that that's what he's been working toward, from the beginning? Just look at his face! You can see in his eyes that I've called it straight!"

Fury had twisted Wade Oliver's flabby features and stamped them with livid pallor, as he turned on the prisoner in the chair. "Curse you, Hatfield!" he gritted. "Hold your tongue or you'll wish you—"

"I want an answer!" Jubal King cut in on him. "Is there any truth in what he says? Danged if I don't believe you would try something of the sort!" His hands knotted into fists. "You can't sell out the Crown like that! There's two of us here against you, remember!"

"Are there?" Hatfield prompted. "I wouldn't count on Vern Lawtry, King. I don't think Oliver would have ventured to pull this doublecross without having met his price beforehand."

"Lawtry?" cried Jubal King hoarsely. He swung to face the foreman and then, at the confirmation he must have read in the man's pale eyes, was suddenly backpedaling, trying to move into a position where he could watch both of his confederates at once.

"No, you don't!" he was shouting. "You don't pull me in no whipsaw! Curse you for a traitorous brace of—"

Then hands were pawing at guns. And Jim Hatfield, poised for this climax to his desperate strategy, was already out of his chair, launching himself at the table where his own guns lay.

Shots blasted behind him, filling the room with an ear-punishing thunder. A bullet chipped a groove in the table top beside him. Then he had his hand on one of the guns and, pivoting on one knee, he faced about into the drift of muzzle smoke from Wade Oliver's weapon.

There was no time for aiming, and he fired with hasty instinct. Muzzle flash seared his vision as the St. Louis man triggered a second time, almost on the instant with his own shot. But Oliver was falling, twisting, and his bullet passed Hatfield's crooked elbow.

Jubal King was already dead, with his foreman's traitorous lead sunk into him, leaving him in a bloody sprawl on the floor of the ranchhouse which for so many years, had been the heart of his Cap Rock kingdom. And across the old man's body, Vern Lawtry was swiveling his gun toward the Ranger.

For an instant, through acrid powder-smoke, his pale eyes met Hatfield's, agleam with fury now.

"You meddling badge-toter!" The words were a harsh whisper, spilling from lips pulled back from the man's strong, white teeth. And as he spoke, he tripped the trigger.

Jim Hatfield was lunging sideward, however, in that very instant, and his own Colt was tipping over to bring Lawtry's big frame within the sights. He felt the tug of Lawtry's bullet slicing through the cloth of his shirt sleeve. Then the trigger-pull bit against his hard finger, and the weapon kicked into his palm.

Getting to his feet, Jim Hatfield looked down at these three whom greed had brought together to steal the wealth of a new land—and whom treachery among themselves had brought now to a final settlement and to death. . . .

STEVE BANNISTER, propped up on one of the dispensary cots with pillows at his back and a clean bandage about his head, listened with intent interest to the Ranger's account of the windup at the Crown. Still pale from bullet-shock, Steve clung to the warm hand of Amy Hilsing, who knelt beside his bed.

Behind him, Adam Hilsing clawed vigorously at his square-cut graying beard. Riley and Buck Robertson were also hanging on every word that Hatfield spoke.

"So that's that," the Lone Wolf said finally. "They nearly wrecked the A and C, but now the danger is over. Your enemies ended up by canceling one another out, folks!"

Bannister took a deep breath. "I wouldn't say that, Hatfield. I think it was you did the canceling!" He added quickly,

"But where does Grady Slocum fit into the picture? Didn't Buck tell you what he saw, out in the Cap Rock brakes?"

"He told me," said Hatfield. He nodded toward the Irish straw boss. "Riley and Buck and I have just now paid the man a little visit, down at his freight office, and put the evidence in front of him for him to explain."

"And could he?"

The Ranger shrugged. "Why, it was clear enough, anyway. Grady Slocum is no fighter. He looks for the easiest way, always, to protect his own interests. Naturally he would make a deal with Ruffin's rimrock crowd, to fetch in their supplies for them in return for their guarantee to let his freight rigs roll unharmed, and not burn them when they destroyed his cargoes of ties for the railroad.

"We used what Buck told us as a club to put a scare into him. It'll keep him in line. And as soon as you're through needing his wagons, he guarantees to pack up and move them farther north—maybe to Oregon or Washington Territory where the rails haven't moved in yet and there's still room for a freighter to operate. You've no reason to expect any trouble from Slocum."

Riley nodded confirmation. "It's clear sailing, Boss! Nothing to do now but build road—thanks to Jim Hatfield!"

"My people, also," put in Adam Hilsing, "have many things for which we owe him thanks. The drill brought in our first well of good, sweet water this morning. Except for Hatfield, we might have given up before this, in despair."

"No question about it," said Bannister. "It's a new day for the Cap Rock!"

Jim Hatfield exchanged an uncomfortable glance with Buck. He liked to win a fight, but the grateful compliments of those he had aided always embarrassed him.

"Old Heart Seven ready for the trail, Buck?" he queried. "Cap'n McDowell, and the Texas Legislature are still waiting for a telegram so they can start the clock again. We better be getting down to Rimrock Station, and find out what kind of a chore the Cap'n has waiting for us next."

"Thee aren't leaving us already, friend?" cried Adam Hilsing.

But Buck understood the Ranger's feelings, and with a whoop and a grin smeared all over his freckled face, he went scurrying to throw gear and saddle on the gray.

Jim Hatfield's flaming Colts provide the antidote for the poison of greed that infests the Panhandle country in—

GOLDEN GUNS

By JACKSON COLE

•

NEXT MONTH'S EXCITING FULL-LENGTH TEXAS RANGER NOVEL!

Wedge's right crashed through again and the red-faced man hit the ground

RANGE ROOKERS

By CLIFF WALTERS

Wedge Wilson runs up against some gold-mine swindlers!

IT WASN'T because silent, unhappy old Mac McNeil, owner of the Riffle Creek spread, had a grudge against him that Wedge Wilson fell heir to most of the heavy work around the outfit. It was just because the big brown-haired lad with massive shoulders tapering wedge-like down to a narrow waist could do the heavy work more easily, thoroughly—and without beefing above it.

Having been reared in the poverty of that unfertile piece of range known as Gumbo Flats, where families were large, grub scarce and overalls usually patched, Wedge wasn't one to rise in his wrath and say, "Get somebody else to shoe work horses and haul rock salt, or pitch hay or haul logs. I hired out to punch cows!"

Of course, this agreeableness had its penalties. Old Mac McNeil became more and more willing to let Wedge do more and more heavy work, while the other

hands, usually a couple of them, sat in their saddles and let their feet hang down.

Wedge, who had had only one year of "readin' and writin' " in the shack schoolhouse on Gumbo Flats, voiced no protest. He saved his wages, putting them in the new bank that had opened a year ago in Arrow City, the growing town ten miles off to the south. But he didn't wear patched overalls any more. And, because old Charley Ling, the Chinese cook, was skilful and generous, the big lad enjoyed bountiful grub.

Stocky, red-faced Pete Garmanch, one of the two other hired men, said one pay day, "What are you goin' to do with all this worldly wealth you're hordin' up, Wedge? Buy a cattle spread of your own some day, or take over one of them banks in Arrow City?"

"He ain't hordin' all his money," said gangling, wiry Chris Smith, the other puncher. "I seen him spend a dime for a sack of candy in the store last month—and while I was buyin' a Navajo saddle blanket, a new lariat and a pair of boots."

"More reckless still, he give the candy away after he bought it," bandied Garmanch, who had been with the Riffle Creek outfit for three months now.

"Not to one of them spangled belles down at the Big Lamp dance hall, I hope!" said dark, shaggy-haired Chris Smith, who had been at Riffle Creek for nearly a year now, and who was an expert hand around cattle. He was a fine rider and roper, and endowed with plenty of cow savvy. "Maybe that's who'll get Wedge's fortune some day—some beguilin' dame with eyes like stars, and a smile that'd make any bank account melt."

Wedge colored and grinned affably. He was accustomed to being a target for jibes. He remembered the sack of candy. He had bought it for a little freckle-faced, shabbily-clothed kid. Wedge had remembered when he too had gazed longingly at the candy case in the store.

THE three men were saddling horses, preparatory to riding out in the hills and rounding up a bunch of broncs to break, when this conversation took place. Wedge was threading his latigo through the cinch ring when old Mac McNeil, boss of the K5, came walking down from the house. A small, gray man who suffered from stomach trouble, Mac looked at tall Chris Smith and said:

"How's the drift fence between Timber Ridge and the canyon, Chris?"

"I was just goin' to tell you that some of them pine posts are rotted off," Smith answered. "Ought to be some new ones set, and some new stays put in. I toggled it up as best I could yesterday, but—"

Mac looked at Wedge. "You better unsaddle your horse, Wedge, and hook up the team," he said. "Take a few cedar posts up there. Know where you can cut a few?"

"Out by Cedar Butte, where I cut the last ones," Wedge answered, and pulled the latigo out of the cinch ring. "Can't drive right to 'em, but I can snake 'em—or pack 'em on my back."

"Pack 'em on your back and save the work horses," Pete Garmanch said, grinning.

"How would you like to go and fix that fence while Wedge rides for horses with Chris?" old Mac said a little sharply to his stocky puncher.

"I'm not a fence builder," Garmanch answered flatly.

"I'll fix 'er," Wedge put in mildly.

"Yeah," old Mac replied, "and probably a dang sight better'n some others would. You ain't scared of a little rock in a post hole. Huh! There'd be a lot more and deeper post holes dug if some people wasn't afraid of bellyin' up to crowbars like they do other kind of bars! Come on, Wedge. I'll help you put the tools in the wagon."

Wedge saw anger sweep across Pete Garmanch's red face. Probably because Pete liked to belly up to the bars in Arrow City when he got the chance. Garmanch started to make some retort, but Chris Smith said brusquely:

"Come on, Pete. We've got some tall ridin' ahead of us."

As the two punchers rode off, Mac said to Wedge, "If you happen to see a cowpuncher lookin' for a job when you're in town next time, fetch him home with you. Especially if he looks like the kind that wouldn't be insulted if you asked him to dig a post hole."

Wedge tried to change the subject. He knew that old Mac's stomach always acted up when he got a little upset about something. Wedge felt sorry for old Mac whose

life had been shadowed by the death of his wife three years ago, and, a year later, the death of his son, Larry McNeil.

Larry had been a fine ambitious lad—from all reports that Wedge had heard. He had been sent across the Steep Rock Mountains to buy some bulls out of a shipment due to arrive at the town of Sheridan. Old Mac had been too ill to go at the time. He had given his son a twelve-hundred-dollar check, drawn on the Stockgrower's National Bank at Arrow City, and made payable to Donahue & Clark, livestock dealers with whom he had dealt before. Young Larry was to hire a rider in Sheridan to help drive the bulls over the mountans to home range.

But tragedy had struck Larry McNeil at Wolf Point Pass, on the summit of the Steep Rocks. He was ambushed by someone who had probably thought he would be carrying cash. He was killed and the twelve-hundred-dollar check, the endorsement forged, was cashed by a renegade gambler who skipped the country before the law started closing in. And the bank who had cashed the check with the forged endorsement, was still holding the sack.

Sometimes, Wedge noticed, old Mac still gazed off in the direction of Wolf Point Pass. And the cowman's hands would clench and unclench slowly.

Old Mac had offered a thousand dollars to anyone who could identify his son's murderer. But nothing happened. The tragedy was receding into oblivion as far as the general public was concerned. But the dark bitterness, the sharp talons, still held their grip on the heart of an old man who had lost something far more precious to him than ranch, range or cattle.

One noon, while Mac had been up to the cow camp on the mountain slope, old Charley Ling, the cook, had shown Wedge young Larry's collection of arrowheads, relics he had picked up on the range. The trinkets, all sizes and colors, were tacked up with pins on the log wall in the room that had been Larry's.

"He sure must've had sharp eyes," Wedge remarked. "Findin' all them. Ain't there one missin'—in that little space there?"

"The little green one," Charley Ling said in his sing-song voice. "I tell it jade—green jade. I know. I see lots long time ago. He say ain't no jade in these hills. I say must be—somewhere. He say he take it to jewelry store sometime, find out maybe."

WEDGE was repairing a couple of pack saddles in the ranch shop that warm July morning a visitor called at the K5. A tall, nice-looking man with a thick mane of gray hair and blue eyes as placid as mountain lakes, stuck his head in the shop door. "Is there any chance of a grubline rider bein' invited to dinner at this outfit, Big Fellow?" he asked in a booming voice.

"Sure," Wedge answered, grinning. "Best cook on the range."

"Lucky Layne's the name."

"The lucky prospector, eh?" Wedge answered. "I've heard of you. Heard my dad tell about you when I was just a kid over on the Gumbo Flats range. He said you was throwin' wealth one day—and ridin' grubline the next. But never ridin' grubline for long. He said you could smell gold."

Layne chuckled softly. He looked toward the corrals. "Say, ain't that Chris Smith and some other feller halter breakin' broncs down there?" he said.

"Yep," Wedge said. "You know Chris?"

"Had many a meal with him in cow camps," the older man replied. "I thought I recognized his elongated form when I saw a couple of riders cashin' horses on the mountain slope yesterday." He turned and called, "Howdy, Chris!"

There was a pause. Then Smith yelled, "Well, Lucky Layne! Come on down here, you old nugget picker!"

Layne occupied old Mac's place at the dinner table that noon. Mac was feeling too sick to eat today. He was lying down in his room. Charley Ling beckoned Wedge into the kitchen. "Boss pletty sick," the Chinese said. "Maybe we better take him to town and see Doc Taylor, eh? I want buy glub, too."

"If you can talk him into goin'—which he should—I'll be glad to take you," Wedge said. "I'll go in and talk to him now."

As Wedge walked back through the dining room, he said to Chris Smith and Pete Garmanch, "Either one you gents been pack-rattin' the shoein' hammer away from the shop? I've got to rivet some pack saddle straps, and it's gone."

"Maybe I left it in the barn," Garmanch replied. "In the currycomb box."

Wedge went in to see Mac. The latter thought he might go to town and see the doctor. He would let Wedge know.

Later, Wedge went to the barn in search of the shoeing hammer. He found it in the currycomb box, all right—but he didn't take it out—not right away. He heard talk coming from outside the barn. Layne and Garmanch and Chris Smith were talking out there.

"I don't think it's any big strike, gents," Layne was saying. "I think it's just a rich little pocket. But if I could get the stuff out, and haul it over to the stamp mill at Flagrock— But there's the hitch. Gettin' it up out of that awful canyon. I've got to have an engine, and pull it up in buckets on a long cable, like I had to do in another place once. It'll cost me six-seven hundred dollars for that equipment."

"Why don't you go to town and get the money?" Chris Smith asked. "Anybody with the money would fall over hisself stakin' you! They know you're straight as a string, Lucky!" Smith's voice was tense.

"Yeah, go to town!" Wedge heard Layne answer. "It'd be like throwin' a juicy bone among a pack of starvin' dogs. Just say 'gold!' and everybody goes crazy. The whole town of Arrow City'd be swarmin' over my claim. They'd be fightin' and clawin' and maybe shootin' one another. Nope! I've seen that business before. I'm keepin' my mouth shut. You two gents are the only ones I've told, and—"

"But I've only got a hundred dollars!" Chris Smith interrupted. "And Pete's only got about forty. Golly! I wish we had more! Enough to put that cable business in and—"

"What about Mac McNeil?" Layne asked. "He's got money. Why don't we let him in on the deal?"

"He wouldn't risk a nickel on gold minin'—and he's told me so!" Chris Smith said.

"But I'll take him up there in the mountains with me and show him what I've got, if he won't take Lucky Layne's word for it," argued the prospector.

"He wouldn't go way up there, Lucky," Pete Garmanch said tensely. "Besides, he ain't able to! And, another thing, he don't need no more money! Give somebody a chance that— How much would somebody stand to make, say that put up four or five hundred?"

"A thousand, maybe. Maybe a couple thousand. Out of what I know I've got up there. And maybe a lot more. But I'm not dreamin' about big wealth this time. If I strike more, all right. Say, how about the other hired hand? The big fellow you call Wedge? Has he got any money saved up?"

"Yeah, he's got five hundred or so in the bank," Garmanch replied. "But he's just a big, dumb ape that—"

"Hold on now, Pete," Chris Smith cut in. "He's a square shooter, Wedge Wilson is. He's worked danged hard here. And he had a plenty tough time of it when he was a kid—starvin' on Gumbo Flats. I'd rather see him reap a harvest than—"

PICKING up the shoeing hammer, Wedge quietly withdrew from the barn. He didn't want to go. He wanted to listen some more. His interest was keenly whetted. He had heard his father talk about Lucky Layne. A dozen times Wedge had heard old Dan Wilson tell the story about Lucky Layne borrowing a hundred dollars from a drunken sheepherder, and how that thirsty shepherd had reaped a ten thousand dollar harvest from his investment and all because Lucky Layne was a square shooter.

Wedge went back to the shop and the pack saddles. But his mind wasn't on his work. He kept glancing off toward the barn, kept waiting to see three men appear and come walking toward the shop. The minutes dragged interminably. Then, at last, the trio appeared. They walked slowly, hesitantly toward Wedge.

It was Chris Smith who spoke first. "Wedge, I s'pose if I asked you to invest your hard-earned savin's in a gold mine, one you'd never even heard about, you'd bounce a sledgehammer off'n my head. Is that right?"

Flushing a bit guiltily, Wedge answered, "Oh, I don't know. I've heard about Lucky Layne. Maybe, if I got the chance—"

Ten minutes later Wedge, who had never withdrawn a penny of the money he had deposited, went up to the ranch-

house and borrowed a check blank. Then he laboriously made out a check for five hundred dollars, payable to John F. Layne. Chris Smith forked a hundred dollars cash over to the prospector. And Pete Garmanch did likewise with his capital of forty dollars.

"We'd better get back to our bronc-breakin', Chris," said Pete Garmanch in a low voice. "I see old Mac out on the porch of the house. And I don't think he'd hesitate to fire me, the way he's been actin' lately."

"Maybe you'll be quittin' your job, anyhow, one of these days, Pete," said Layne. "You and Chris both."

"Not Chris," Garmanch answered. "He's in line to ramrod this outfit after old Mac gets so sick he has to move to town and let the doc keep an eye on him. Ain't that right, Wedge?"

"As far as I can tell, it is," said the big lad as he took the receipt that Layne was handing him.

Layne rode away while Wedge resumed his work. He was glad that he had plugged along here at the K5, heavy work or not. Otherwise he wouldn't have been here when Lady Fortune came his way at last.

Charley Ling came down to the shop and said that the boss would go to town and see the doc. Would Wedge hook the light team up to the buckboard?

"Too bad you had that runaway that time and had the wits scared out of you, Charley," Wedge said, grinning. "Then you could drive a team."

"Me go, but you drive," Charley said. "Hurry fast, Wedge. Boss sick plenty bad!"

The team of bays were young and fast. By mid-afternoon the buckboard was whisking into Arrow City. But Doc Taylor was out of town. Mrs. Taylor said he should return within an hour. She suggested Mac and his two companions could come in the house and wait.

"We'll go over to the store, Mrs. Taylor," Mac said. "Charley's got to buy some grub. And Wedge ought to buy a new pair of overalls, whether he wants to squander that much money or not."

Wedge flushed as the lady laughed. But he told himself that old Mac might grin on the other side of his face some day before too long.

Meantime the buckboard had pulled up to the hitching rack in front of Parmalee's General Emporium, when Wedge, tying the off horse to the smooth-worn pole, suddenly froze in his tracks. Layne was backing out of the bank next door, one of the town's two banks. And he was holding a gun.

"Don't let that man get away!" barked the bank cashier from the door. "He's trying to cash a no-good check for five hundred dollars! And when I called him on it—"

"Nobody'd better try stoppin' me!" Layne shouted. "If they do—" He waved his forty-five menacingly.

Dumbfounded for a moment, Wedge finally came to life. He moved toward Layne slowly. "Easy now, Lucky," he said. "There's some misunderstandin' somehow."

"Keep away from me, you big, dumb ox!" Layne snarled.

Those harsh words were a whip cracking in Wedge's face. Layne kept making toward his buckskin horse which was tied to the store hitching rack, a fleet, rangy horse, Wedge had noticed earlier today.

Suddenly Layne whirled to untie the reins looped around the pole. As he did so, Wedge made a flying leap. A gun roared. A leaden slug ripped the collar on the big man's cotton shirt. Then Wedge thwarted another shot, one that might have ended his life, by smashing out with a right which lifted Layne off the ground and sent him crashing into the hitching rack.

As Wedge grabbed up a fallen gun, old Mac yelled, "Look out, Wedge! Chris Smith and Garmanch—"

Hoofbeats were echoing across a vacant lot across the street, the weed-grown lot between the saddle shop and the Round-up Saloon. Wedge heard a gun roar. He heard a bullet scream past him. He pulled the trigger of Layne's gun. His too-fast shot ticked through the tip of the right ear on Chris Smith's gray horse. The horse, a snuffy one, wheeled. And Pete Garmanch's roan crashed into him broadside. Both horses fell. Riders leaped free of the melee. Wedge dropped Layne's gun.

Wedge now ran over to the porch of the saloon to reach the closest one, Garmanch. Wedge smashed out with another uppercut. Garmanch, stocky and stout, didn't

go down. He only reeled back. Then lank, wiry Chris Smith was leaping at Wedge, smashing him with a blow to the side of the head.

FLOUNDERING for an instant under the impact of that vicious punch, the big man finally straightened up, ducked another punch coming at him, and nearly tore Chris Smith apart with a body smash. Smith went sprawling, but Pete Garmanch was coming in. Wedge met him toe to toe. Knuckles thudded as men yelled. Then Wedge's right crashed through again. It cracked to Garmanch's face. The red-faced man hit the ground.

"What's goin' on here?" bellowed Tom Garrett, the deputy sheriff, who was hot-footing it up the now-busy street. "Ain't that Lucky— No! It ain't! It's Lucky's coyote brother—Badger Layne!"

"Badger Layne?" blurted Wedge, his head swimming a little.

"He said he was Lucky Layne!" said the excited bank cashier. "He tried to cash a five hundred dollar check, signed by some man named Richard Wilson and nobody by that name has an account in the Stockgrower's National Bank! He called me a liar!"

"Richard Wilson?" old Mac piped up. "Why, that's my man Wedge here! Wedge, did you give this coyote"—Mac pointed—"a check for—"

"Yeah," Wedge answered, still in a daze. "But it was a dirty frame-up. These two skunks, Smith and Garmanch, pulled a trick on me. They forked what money they had over to 'Lucky' Layne in front of me, on a gold mine investment. I know now why they ain't at home breakin' broncs. They sneaked into town, on a high lope, to split my five hundred with Layne. I'll show you the check I give him!"

Wedge reached down and ripped the pockets off Layne's overalls. He revealed the check, all right. But he revealed something else—a little green arrowhead that brought an alarmed cry from old Charley Ling.

"Larry's jade arrowhead, Mac!" the old Chinese cried, trembling. "I tell you he take it maybe to jewelry shop over in Sheridan when he go after bulls! I tell you!"

Mac McNeil was no longer a statue. Slowly, deliberately, he picked up a fallen six-shooter and said, "You let me alone for the next few minutes, Deputy Garrett! I'm goin' to make Lucky Layne's coyote brother wake up and talk! Talk straight! And nobody's stoppin' me!"

Badger Layne talked, all right. He knew that he was tottering on the brink of death, swift and violent. He could see it in the blazing eyes of Mac McNeil, could hear it in the cowman's sharp, metallic questions. Yes, Badger Layne had killed Larry McNeil. And Pete Garmanch's brother, a tinhorn gambler, had cashed the twelve hundred dollar check drawn on the Stockgrower's National Bank. And Chris Smith knew all about it. Smith and Garmanch had been pals long before they had gone to work at the K5.

Excitement was running rife in the town when Garrett, with Wedge's aid, dragged three men toward jail. Garrett said to his helper, "I'm sure glad you was in town today! Dang! The way you knocked them three coyotes cold—"

"I kinda hate bein' shot at," was all that Wedge said.

Old Mac was waiting for Wedge by the

[*Turn page*]

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hitching rack. He said, "That was a pretty slick trick you pulled, lad—baitin' Badger Layne into trouble. Givin' him your check on the Stockgrower's National Bank, when you've got your account in the Stockman's State Bank."

Wedge blinked.

"You're smarter than I thought you was, Wedge," Mac resumed. "Of course, you know I've got a standin' offer for the man that turned up my son's murderer. But it's worth a thousand to me. Now I can quit layin' in bed, wonderin', wonderin'. Larry'd appreciate what you done today. So do I. And when I leave the K5 and move to town, where the doc can tend to me, you're goin' to ramrod the K5. Maybe you're goin' to be a pard in it pretty soon. Why not? I've got no relatives."

The town of Arrow City was swirling around Wedge. And there seemed to be three or four Charley Ling's standing there grinning at him. But Wedge finally found his tongue. He swallowed hard.

"Hold on, Mac," he said. "I'd like to be deservin' of all the praise you're heapin' on my dumb head, but I ain't. I can just barely read and write, you know. And, when I borrowed one of your check blanks, I didn't notice it was for the Stockgrower's National Bank. I was just a dumb ox, bein' rooked by Badger Layne and his two old pals, Garmanch and Smith. And if you hadn't been so sick we had to fetch you to town, Charley and me—well, maybe Layne would've cashed my check. And I'd been broke, but wiser!"

Old Mac smiled at his Chinese cook. "I told you how it'd be, Charley," he said. "I told you Wedge Wilson wouldn't make a grab for what he thought he didn't have comin'. But I didn't have to argue with you, Charley. You thought the same as I did, and he'd tell the truth at the showdown."

"What do you mean?" Wedge wanted to know.

"I mean you're not only work brittle, lad," said old Mac huskily, "but you've got a heart as clean as the hills after a rainstorm. And you're goin' to run the K5. Yeah, and because you did show up the skunk that killed Larry—whether you did it accidentally or not—you're goin' to have a thousand cash, a gift from me. I don't care about havin' an undeservin' hero for a pard, Wedge Wilson. I'll be satisfied with one like you."

"Good. Plenty good!" said old Charley Ling, beaming and clutching tightly in his hand a small arrowhead made of the semi-precious stone which the Indian had discovered, long before the white men, in the sage-covered hills of Wyoming. Jade as green as that which, more than likely, some of Charley Ling's venerable ancestors had carved in a land far across the Pacific, and in years long buried beneath the dust of Time.

Wedge smiled as he gripped Mac McNeil's proffered hand. He said sheepishly, "I'd better watch out, after this, what bank I'm writin' checks on. I didn't cotton to the looks of that jail house!"

The twin guns of Outlaw Littlejohn thunder retribution when a killer gang threatens a trail herd crew in LONG SAM MOOCHES A MEAL, a smashing story of the badlands by LEE BOND coming next month!

By BEN FRANK

Mr. Hopkins started to rise, but Sheriff MacLoyd barked, "Set down!"

Doc Swap's Homecoming Rumpus

LEANING forward in the red plush seat as if that would make the train go faster, old Doc Swap reckoned that if he didn't get a glimpse of Dry Bluffs pretty soon, he'd explode with eagerness. And then he saw his beloved town nestling against the big sandy bluff. The faded yellow depot. The one dusty street with its false-fronted buildings. The few scattered houses beyond. With a wide grin plastered on his round whiskery face, the oldster shoved to his feet, wrapped fat fingers about the handle of a battered suitcase and headed for the coach door.

For long months, Doc Swap had been in the East, not because he'd wanted to be there, but because his sister, Ursula, had been ill, and he had had to look after her. But now she was well, and Doc was home.

The tradin' hombre builds an old tin can into an iron-clad trap for bank robbers!

The train lurched to a stop. Doc clamped on his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the big hat and considered this deal one of the highlights of his stormy career—and waddled down the steps to the sun-splashed platform.

"Hi, Doc! Welcome home!" voices shouted.

There they were, old friends clustered about to greet him. Cy Pulley, the barber. Jeff Weber who ran the general store. Lou Loomis, Pee-wee Miller. They crowded around Doc, slapping him on the back and shaking his hand until he thought his arm would come loose from his shoulder.

Happily Doc looked about at the familiar faces. Wes Shotwell, the blacksmith. Johnny Goodland who worked in the bank. Just about everybody—and then Doc felt a touch of anger. The one person whom he had been most eager to see wasn't there. Sheriff MacLoyd!

For forty years, Doc and the sheriff had been rivals in the two occupations dearest to Doc's heart—swapping and fiddle playing. For as many years, they had been in a constant wrangle, each trying to outswap the other. Outwardly they seemed to be bitter enemies. Deep in their hearts, they felt a great fondness for one another. A fondness which they kept well concealed from the citizens of Dry Bluffs. Since the sheriff never missed meeting the afternoon train, his absence now was nothing more nor less than a direct insult.

"Ding-dum!" Doc muttered under his breath.

"Doc," Pee-wee Miller said, a wide grin on his monkeylike face, "I'll bring your bay team around this evenin'. Reckon you're bustin' to go on a swappin' spree."

Everybody laughed and shook hands with Doc again.

At last the old swapper broke away from his friends and headed down the street. Getting home sure made a man feel fine. But dad-blast Sheriff MacLoyd, who had failed to meet the train. Doc walked past the cracker-box jail without a glance. Not for a million dollars would he let on that he'd missed his old friendly enemy.

SAFELY past the jail, Doc lifted his eyes. Dry Bluffs seemed the same as when he had left it. Then he observed a sign which said, "R. R. Hopkins, Real Estate Office." A new business had come to town while he'd been away.

When he came to Ginny Flag's lunchroom, Doc slowed his pace. Ginny made the best blueberry pie in the world, and there was a chance that the sheriff might be inside, drinking a cup of coffee. Hopefully, Doc waddled into the neat little lunchroom.

MacLoyd wasn't there. But two smug looking, well-dressed strangers were sitting at a table. Paying them no mind, Doc mounted a counter stool and called, "Hey, Ginny."

Ginny hurried from the kitchen. She was young and pretty, with golden hair and blue eyes. Without a word, smiling, she reached into the pie case, lifted out half a blueberry pie and set it in front of the old swapper.

"Ginny," he said happily, "you're gettin' prettier every day!" He took a bit of pie. It melted in his mouth. "They don't have food like this in Philly. They don't know—"

At that moment, the strangers arose and stepped to the cash register. After they had departed, Doc asked, "Who're them?"

"Mr. Hopkins, the real estate man," Ginny answered, "and a Mr. Dunlap, who came here day before yesterday. Mr. Hopkins believes that Dry Bluffs can be made the prettiest town in the West. Mr. Dunlap is a specialist in city improvement. He's come here to give Dry Bluffs a face lifting."

Right off, Doc disliked the two strangers heartily. "Why, dad-blast it!" he exploded. Dry Bluffs is already the prettiest town in the West!"

Ginny chuckled. "Calm down, Doc, and eat your pie."

When Doc came to his neat, white cottage at the edge of town, he felt a great warmness flood through him. Whistling happily through his white whiskers, he unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

Everything was just as he'd left it, except for the thick dust on the furniture. Flinging his suitcase to one side, he rushed into the bedroom, kicked out of his store clothes and got into something comfortable—a faded shirt, an old pair of corded

pants baggy at the knees, a worn pair of boots. Still whistling, he headed for the kitchen.

At the door, he came to an abrupt halt. Someone had tossed a rock through the kitchen window, and glass lay scattered all over the floor.

Swearing fiercely, Doc stamped out through the back door and began a search for clues, although he didn't really expect to find any. The ground was cement hard —no footprints. He came to the back fence and saw where the rock had been pried out of the ground. Then an object caught his eye. He picked it up, turned it over and over in his fat fingers. Eyes smoldering, he dug an old envelope from a pocket and deposited the object carefully inside.

"Exhibit A," he muttered. "When I find out who lost this—"

Then a new thought struck him. He now had an excuse to visit Sheriff MacLoyd. Suddenly grinning, he headed uptown.

BY THE TIME he reached the jail, he was puffing like a leaky sawmill engine. He climbed the three steps to the jail and barged into the dingy two-by-four office. Ham Brady, MacLoyd's deputy, sat behind the spur-scarred desk.

"Howdy, Doc." Ham shoved to his feet and pawed the tail of his squirrel-skin cap out of his eyes. Winter or summer, day or night, Ham wore that motheaten old cap.

"Where's MacLoyd?" Doc demanded.

"Talkin' with some of the city officials about beautifyin' Dry Bluffs," Ham replied.

"Beautifyin'—cráziest thing I ever hear of. Go tell the ole bag of bones I got a complaint to make."

Grinning, Ham shuffled outside.

Alone in the office, Doc glanced about. The rusty iron safe. The sagging chairs. The fly-specked window. The unswept floor. Doc's eyes fixed on an object lying across the top of a filing case, a long-bladed sword in a black leather scabbard.

Curious, Doc pulled the sword from the scabbard. The blade was as shiny as a new dollar and as keen as a razor. Doc's blue eyes brightened. The weapon would look mighty pretty, dangling from a peg above the native rock fireplace in his front room. Doc had a weakness for old guns and swords and—

The door opened behind him. Turning, he saw Sheriff MacLoyd, a fierce scowl on his long bony face.

"You fat ole toad," the sheriff roared, "put down that sword 'fore you cut off your head, or somethin'!"

Doc ignored the insult. "This your'n?" he asked mildly.

"Shore it's mine. A gen-u-wine Civil War officer's sword. Wouldn't take a hundred dollars for it."

Feeling a tremor of excitement, Doc carefully returned the sword to its scabbard. Anything that MacLoyd possessed and valued, Doc never failed to attempt to get, one way or another.

"Wouldn't want it around my place," he said, shrugging an indifferent shoulder. "A feller might fall on it, or—"

"Heh, heh!" MacLoyd cackled meaningfully.

Doc stiffened slightly, for it suddenly occurred to him that the sword was swapping bait. He felt a trickle of sweat working through his left eyebrow. Then he glanced at the sheriff again and realized for the first time that MacLoyd was wearing a faded red shirt with faded red buttons.

"Ding-dum!" he exclaimed.

MacLoyd ignored both the "ding-dum" and the startled look on Doc's fat, red face. "So, like a bad penny, you come back. Thought mebbe we'd got rid of you for good. Well, what'd you want to see me about, you ole swindler?"

Unperturbed, Doc told about the broken window.

Looking disgusted, MacLoyd filled his mouth with a fistful of fine-cut. "So what?" he demanded. "Think I ain't got nothin' more important to do than worry about a busted window?"

"What've you got to worry about that's so important?"

MacLoyd dead-centered the battered spittoon. "I'm on the committee that's plannin' to make Dry Bluffs the most beautiful town in the West."

"Phooey!" Doc snorted.

"We got us a expert on city improvement. Name's Dunlap. A friend of Mr. Hopkins, our new real estate man. Goin' to put in fancy store fronts. Fix up the streets. Plant trees an'—"

His voice trailed off, for Doc had again

picked up the sword.

"Might swap that to you," the bony man murmured.

Doc hastily put down the sword. It was a tactical error to show interest in something which he wanted to get from the sheriff.

"Ain't got no use for a sword," he said.

MacLoyd grinned wickedly. "Was goin' to suggest I might swap it to you for yore fiddle an'—"

Doc shuddered slightly. For years, the sheriff had been trying to get his hands on Doc's beloved red-gold fiddle.

"—an'," MacLoyd continued, "for one of your bay hosses to boot!"

That was adding insult to injury. A great anger swept over Doc.

"Keep your pig-sticker," he yelled, "you bony ole—ole—"

When Doc got riled to a certain point, he never could think of the right thing to say. Pulling his fancy Stetson down to his red ears, he kicked a chair across the room and went out, slamming the door violently behind him.

THAT evening, the runty Pee-wee Miller, ex-cook and roustabout, came with Doc's team of fat sleek bays, which he had cared for during the old swapper's absence. Doc looked his horses over and allowed that he'd never seen them in better condition.

Pleased pink, Pee-wee squatted on his heels and began to bring Doc up to date on the latest happenings. "Mr. Hopkins come here about three months ago. Opened his office an' made hisself a big-shot. Nice feller. Thinks Dry Bluffs is a good town. Wants to make it the garden spot of the West."

Doc snorted and expressed an unprintable opinion of Mr. Hopkins and his ideas.

"Mr. Dunlap come here a couple days ago," Pee-wee continued. "Got a suitcase full of pictures of how a town oughta look. Says if the citizens'll back him, he'll beautify Dry Bluffs an'—"

"Sounds kinda fishy to me," Doc growled.

"Most people is in favor of beautifyin' things, Doc. Especially MacLoyd."

"MacLoyd is an old fool!" Doc opined disgustedly.

After Pee-wee had departed, Doc ambled to the Palace Saloon for his nightly bottle of favorite beverage—strawberry pop. The talk there was about making Dry Bluffs the garden spot of the West. Disgusted, Doc went home. Dry Bluffs suited him just like it was.

"Garden spot, phooey!" he snorted. Then he remembered Sheriff MacLoyd's sword. And the broken kitchen window.

He pawed the envelope from a pocket and stared thoughtfully at Exhibit A. Suddenly he knew there was but one thing for him to do. Tomorrow he had to go on a swapping spree through Sugar Valley.

Nesters were settling up the valley, and nesters were swappers. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind, and he certainly needed a sharp mind in order to get the sheriff's sword and, maybe, figure out what Hopkins and Dunlap were really up to. Carefully he tucked Exhibit A back into a pocket.

The next day, Doc was on his way along the Sugar Creek Trail before sunup, sitting on the sagging spring seat of his old covered wagon in which he hauled his swapping goods. It was spring, the country was fresh and green. Doc felt fine and began to whistle softly between his teeth.

But suddenly he remembered something that stopped his whistle. He'd left home in such a hurry that he'd plumb forgotten to bring any swapping goods along.

Cussing softly, he stared about searchingly. The rising sun glittered on an object beside the trail, a discarded tincan. He pulled the bays up short, climbed down and got the can.

Eyes gleaming, the old swapper returned to the spring seat. If he could turn that tincan into a load of goods and get the sheriff's sword to boot, he'd know for sure he hadn't lost his swapping touch. Whistling again, he drove on.

An hour later, Doc came to Ike and Millie Johnson's homestead. Ike had gone to his corn field to hoe weeds, but Millie was in the kitchen, a milk-curdling scowl on her red, bony face.

Upon answering Doc's knock, she stared out at him with open disapproval. "Heard you was back," she snapped, "but didn't expect to see you around so soon."

"Just had to get out an' visit ole friends," Doc smiled.

"Well," Millie said, "nice to see you

again, Doc. Good-by."

She started to close the door, but Doc's foot was in the way.

"Millie," Doc said, "you seem sorta upset about somethin'."

"Am upset, she admitted. "Started to grate some hoss-reddish and can't find my grater."

By now Doc was safely inside the house. His eyes fixed on an old claw hammer and a bulging sack of nails. "Got just what you need, Millie," he declared.

"Doc, if you got a grater, I'll buy—"

"Ain't for sale," Doc said hastily. "Might swap it for that hammer an' them nails to boot."

MILLIE considered briefly and nodded her head. Doc picked up the hammer and the sack of nails and waddled to his wagon. It took him less than a minute to make a grater out of the tincan by punching a series of nail holes in it.

Millie gave the improvised grater a whirl on a horse-radish root. It worked fine. Smiling happily, she said, "Doc, I'm sure glad you've come back to God's country again."

"Millie," Doc said fervently, "I'm sure glad to be back!"

He made his next stop at Ad Trotter's run-down, tar-papered shack. Ad, an old bachelor who spent as much time as possible sitting in a rickety rocking chair in the shade of his one unhappy oak tree, was on the roof of his shack, attempting to weight down the paper roofing with a dozen sizable rocks.

Leathery face dripping sweat, he stared down morosely at the fat old swapper. "Trouble, trouble, trouble," he said sadly. "The blasted wind blowed my roof loose t'other day, an'—"

"Why don't you nail that paper down?" Doc asked.

"Nail it down!" Ad swore furiously. "I been so blamed busy weightin' it down, I ain't had time to go to town for nails."

Doc drew a handful of nails from the paper sack. "Intended to use these myself, but—"

"Doc, hand me them nails. I'll pay you later for—"

"Ain't for sail," Doc said quickly. "Might swap—"

Doc drove away from Ad's place without the nails. But for them he had received two gallon jugs, smelling suspiciously of home-brew, an old oil can with oil in it, a roll of window screen and a rusty harness buckle to boot. Not that Doc needed the buckle for the bays' harness, but he always demanded boot in a trade.

A little later, he came to Indian Springs. Here he washed the jugs and filled them with cold, crystal clear water. After letting the horses drink, he packed the jugs in a nest of wet grass and went on his way along the trail. That cold water would be mighty nice to have, he figured, for the day had turned hot.

Coming up over a low hill, he saw a horse and buggy, which he recognized as belonging to the Bean Livery Barn. The buggy stood empty. Then Doc spied two men out in Loop and Puney Porter's corn field, shoveling dirt into a hole. They were Mr. Hopkins and Mr. Dunlap. Curious, Doc pulled up to watch.

A few minutes later, the men returned to the buggy and climbed in. Strangers always fascinated Doc, especially any who wanted to beautify Dry Bluffs.

Smiling, Doc swept off his fancy hat and bowed deeply. "Fine day, gentlemen. My name's Doc Swap, at your service."

Mr. Hopkins, the real estate broker, was a baldish, heavy-set man with a gold watch chain across his plump middle. He eyed Doc rather coldly.

Mr. Dunlap, a tall, thin man with a hook-nose, returned Doc's smile and introduced himself and Mr. Hopkins.

Then Mr. Hopkins said, "Mr. Dunlap likes this country so well he's going to buy a farm. I have the Porter place for sale and brought Mr. Dunlap out to show him how rich the soil is."

"So that's why you were diggin'," Doc murmured. He had slid to the ground and now approached the buggy. He noticed that the wheels were dabbed with yellow clay, but didn't think anything about it at the time. "How'd you like the soil, Mr. Dunlap?"

"Fine, fine," Mr. Dunlap said. "I—"

At that moment, Mr. Hopkins let out a hoarse cry and began to fan the air with both hands. "A honey bee!" he croaked fearfully. "Help! Help!"

"A bee won't hurt nobody much," Doc soothed.

"A bee sting makes me deathly sick," Mr. Hopkins said through gray lips. "I'd as soon be bit by a rattlesnake as stung by a bee. You see, the poison—"

"Howdy, gents," a voice interrupted, and they turned to see Deputy Ham Brady, squirrel skin cap and all, sitting astride a knock-kneed paint. Ham had ridden up unnoticed during the excitement over the honey bee.

THE DEPUTY slid to the ground, and his saddle slid along with him. Ham swore fiercely. Then he turned toward the buggy and said, "The Dry Bluffs bank was robbed last night!"

A stunned silence met his announcement.

"Somebody opened the bank safe like it was a sardine can. Got away with right at ten thousand dollars. MacLoyd's runnin' in circles an' tearin' his hair. Sent me out here on a wild goose chase to see if anybody has saw any suspicious strangers. Well, have you?"

Doc and the two men shook their heads emphatically.

Ham turned back to his horse and swore again. "Busted my cinch strap buckle an'—"

"Got a buckle I might swap you," Doc said hastily.

For the buckle, he managed to get a fair saddle blanket, an old pair of pliers and a jackknife to boot. Still swearing, Ham mounted the paint and rode on his weary way.

Mr. Hopkins mopped his pale brow and sighed deeply. "Too bad about the bank. You know, that digging made me hot and thirsty. What I wouldn't give for a cold drink of water!"

"We brought along food but forgot water," Mr. Dunlap said.

Doc hefted one of the jugs from its nest of wet grass. "Got some spare water, gents. Water is right precious here, but—"

"We'll pay you for it," Mr. Hopkins offered eagerly.

Patiently Doc explained that he was not one to sell things. "But," he added, "I might do some swappin'."

For the jug of water, Doc got Mr. Hopkins' very fancy necktie, a sizable portion of the lunches and Mr. Dunlap's drawing pencil. Hastily he drove away from the two men before they discovered that the Porter house, where they could obtain all the water they wanted free, was just over the next ridge.

Doc was on the point of sinking his teeth into a juicy ham sandwich when he came in sight of Ed Lunt's homestead. Remembering the excellence of Minnie Lunt's cooking, he returned the sandwich to its wrapper and tucked it away for the future.

When Minnie opened the door to Doc's persistent knocking, the mouth-watering smells of cooking food struck Doc like a blow. Suddenly he was famished.

Bowing deeply, he whipped off his fancy Stetson. "Minnie," he said pleasantly, "it's nice to see you lookin' so happy an' carefree."

"Well," Minnie said darkly, "I ain't happy an' carefree. This is Ed's birthday, and I forgot to get him a present."

Without a word, Doc waddled to his wagon and got the fancy necktie.

"I don't reckon Ed would like this. Besides, I figure on wearin' it myself. It's a gen-u-wine imported tie, an'—"

Minnie clutched at the tie. "Doc, name your price."

Doc wiggled his nose. "Might eat a bite of that birthday dinner. Would have to have some boot, though."

Doc not only got his dinner and two slices of birthday cake, but also a loaf of bread, a dozen eggs and a broken-down clock.

Stuffed to the gills, he drove to the shade along Sugar Creek, found a soft grassy spot and prepared to take his noonday nap. But the rattle of a buggy made him sit up and look about. The driver was none other than Sheriff MacLoyd, his tin star pinned to his faded red shirt.

The deep worried scowl on the sheriff's bony face gave Doc a certain feeling of pleasure. Any time MacLoyd ran up against trouble, anything was likely to happen, and Doc knew it.

"Fine day, Sheriff," the old swapper called pleasantly.

MacLoyd pulled his sweaty horse to a halt, puckered his thin lips and sent a stream of tobacco juice with uncanny accuracy into a knothole of a cottonwood some fifteen feet distant.

"Fine day, my eye!"

"You seem a mite disturbed," Doc said innocently.

MACLOYD swore with an expertness that comes only from long and frequent practice. "To begin with, somebody busted into the bank safe last night an' took a wad of money."

"Do tell!" Doc said, pretending surprise.

"Then I made a fool of myself."

"That ain't nothin' unusual."

"I suspicioned the two newest hombres in Dry Bluffs."

"Me an' who else?" Doc asked, round eyed.

MacLoyd snorted. "Not you. You wouldn't have brains enough to bust into a safe. Mr. Hopkins and Mr. Dunlap."

"They're likely guilty."

"No such thing!" The sheriff pinpointed the knothole again. "They'd left town early this mornin', so I searched their rooms at the hotel and busted into Mr. Hopkins' office and searched it. Didn't find a thing suspicious. Now I'm lookin' for 'em. Want to apologize. Dad-bust it, Doc, I should've knowed better—"

His voice ended in a croak, for Doc had hauled the lunch into view. MacLoyd had the appetite of a starved coyote.

"Doc," he wheezed, "I ain't et since early mornin'."

"Sorry," Doc said coldly, "but this is my supper, an'—"

"Let's do some swappin', Doc."

For a moment, Doc considered trying to trade the lunch for the sword, but decided that the time was not yet right. However, he did do some swapping—the lunch for an old spade, a box of fishing tackle and an old pair of hip boots.

After the sheriff had consumed the food, Doc said, "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. I seen Mr. Hopkins and Mr. Dunlap this mornin'. They was in the Porter corn field. Looked like they might be buryin' somethin' or other."

MacLoyd's pale eyes bugged slightly at this news. "Mebbe they was buryin' the bank loot," he said hoarsely.

"Too bad you ain't got a spade so you could go dig—"

"Doc, I'll use your spade."

Doc shook his head. "Never loan anything. Might swap—"

In vain MacLoyd argued and swore and threatened. Doc stood firm. At last, they made a deal. For the return of his bait-digging spade, MacLoyd parted with his buggy whip and a sack of fine-cut tobacco. Not that Doc chewed tobacco, but he always had to have boot in a trade.

Doc trailed the sheriff back to the corn field and sat in the cool shade of his covered wagon, while MacLoyd worked in the broiling sun, digging in the rich black earth. He found nothing. Tired, hot and fuming, he waded from the field and tossed the spade angrily into his buggy.

"Doc," he said, "if you'd kept your big mouth shut—why in thunder didn't you stay in Philadelphia?"

Inwardly Doc felt as happy as a kid with a new water pistol. Outwardly he appeared deeply hurt.

"Them words comin' from you," he said sadly, "make me feel bad."

"Fine!" MacLoyd ran a bony hand into a hip pocket. It came out empty. "Hey," he yipped, "I've lost my eatin' tobacco!"

"No," Doc reminded gently, "you swapped it to me."

For the sack of fine-cut, Doc got back the spade and an old lariat to boot. The old swapper like to laughed himself sick after the sheriff had driven on.

Late that afternoon, Doc visited Homer Prutt's place. Homer, a bachelor, farmed in a haphazard way for a living and spent most of his time in his lean-to workshop, inventing contraptions that never worked. Sitting in the doorway of his shop, he was so engrossed with his thinking that he didn't see Doc until the old swapper's shadow fell over him. Startled, he looked up at Doc suspiciously through thick-rimmed glasses.

"You look somewhat fussed, Homer," Doc said.

Homer blinked his tired eyes. "Doc," he said huskily, "I'm about to save the ranch owners a million cowboy-hours."

"Do tell!" Doc murmured. "That's wonderful, Homer!"

"Ever stop to figure out how much time all the cowboys in the world waste rollin' their cigarettes."

Doc shook his head.

"A million hours. Mebbe more. I'm about to invent a pocket-size cigarette roller. Push a button, an' you've got yoreself a cigarette, all lit an' ready to go."

"Just what the world needs!" Doc declared.

"Only hitch is, I need some small cogwheels an'—"

Doc held up the broken-down clock, and an ear-to-ear smile lit up Homer's thin face.

For the clock, Doc received a peck of potatoes, a pound of coffee, a paper bag of sugar, a can of peaches—Doc was thinking seriously about his supper—and a garden rake to boot. Not that Doc could eat the rake, but he had to have boot.

Late that afternoon, the old swapper made camp at his favorite camping spot on the right bank of Sugar Creek. With the aid of the sheriff's fishing tackle, he caught a fine mess of fish. Later he dined royally on fish and potatoes baked in the hot embers of his camp fire and topped the meal with canned peaches.

That night, rolled snugly in his blanket, his eyes fixed on the bright stars, he reviewed the day's happenings with satisfaction. For a tincan, which he had found, he had become the possessor of a great many articles, including two very tasty meals. He guessed he hadn't lost his swapping touch, after all.

Then he remembered the broken kitchen window and the envelope, Exhibit A, in his pocket and frowned slightly. Also, there was the matter of Hopkins and Dunlap. And the robbery of the Dry Bluffs bank. And Sheriff MacLoyd's sword. Maybe he hadn't lost his swapping touch, but the wheels in his head weren't turning very fast. He still had some problems to solve.

DOC awoke with a start. It was morning. He sat up and gazed about. It seemed that during the night, some loosely connected ideas had been trying to get together in his head. Such ideas as buggy wheels, creek banks, the two strangers and Loop and Puney Porter. Bewildered, Doc put on his boots, built a fire and made his breakfast.

That morning, he drove to Loop and Puney's farm. He found the two Porter cousins with welts on their seamy faces and a tired, defeated expression in their eyes.

"Can't sleep for the blasted mosquitoes," Loop said.

"Screens all rusted out on the bedroom windows," Puney explained.

Immediately Doc showed them the roll of screen wire. They were more than willing to swap for it—two sections of iron pump rods, a screen wire fly trap, and for boot, an old buggy wheel.

"Goin' to sell your farm?" Doc asked.

"Listed it with Mr. Hopkins," Loop said.

Doc sighed. Maybe Mr. Dunlap was looking at the soil yesterday, after all. Doc started to load the buggy wheel into his covered wagon. There was dried mud on the spokes, and suddenly the wheels in Doc's head began to spin.

"Got to be goin',' he said hoarsely, leaped to the sagging spring seat and headed the bays at a fast clip back toward the place where he'd caught the mess of fish. Doc had just remembered the yellow clay on the wheels of the buggy which Hopkins and Dunlap had rented from the Bean Livery Barn.

"Ding-dum!" the oldster exploded disgustedly. "Might've knowed them two jaspers was lookin' at the Porter farm just as a excuse for drivin' out into the country early in the mornin'."

Arriving at the creek, he leaped to the ground and began to search along the yellow clay bank. Presently he discovered the tracks of a buggy. Swearing softly, he returned to his wagon, got out the sections of pump rods, screwed them together and fastened them securely to the garden rake with a length of the old lariat. After donning the hip boots, he waddled back to where he'd found the buggy tracks, waded into the creek and began to fish about with the long-handled rake.

After an hour's patient and tiresome work, he had acquired quite a collection of chisels, drill bits and queer looking gadgets known to the safe cracking trade as "burgular" tools. These he put into the sheriff's tackle box with a feeling of deep satisfaction.

But driving along the Sugar Creek Trail toward Dry Bluffs at a fast pace, his satisfaction vanished. Maybe he could prove that Hopkins and Dunlap had visited the creek, but he couldn't prove they had dumped the burgular tools into the water.

"Ding-dum!" he fumed. "Can't even prove that these tools was used to bust into the safe. If I only had found the money, or—"

He lifted his eyes and discovered that he was approaching Dad Blamit's side-hill shack. Old Dad Blamit, his long white beard flying in the breeze, stood in the

middle of his vegetable garden, not far from a hive of bees. He looked unhappy.

"What's troublin' you, Dad?" Doc asked cheerfully.

Dad Blamit straightened his perpetually aching back and glared up at Doc. "Busted my dad-blamed rake. Ain't got nothin' to break up the dad-blamed clods with. A man can't raise no dad-blamed garden worth shucks unless he's got a—"

Doc held up the garden rake. "Got a hankerin' to own some of your honey bees, Dad."

Doc brought out the fly trap and baited it with some syrup made of sugar and water. It wasn't long until he had quite an army of bees buzzing around angrily inside the trap. For boot, he got an old rusty pair of tinsnips.

"Doc," Dad Blamit said, "you're gettin' cheated. Them bees won't make no honey without a queen."

"It ain't honey I'm after," Doc returned, grinning.

Arriving in Dry Bluffs, Doc drove straight to the livery barn. But just as he had feared, the buggy Hopkins and Dunlap had used the day before had been washed.

"Remember what kind of mud was on them buggy wheels?" he asked Willie Bean.

The kid shook his head. "Didn't pay no attention."

Sighing, Doc drove on to the jail.

MacLoyd sat slumped behind his desk, his bony face filled with a woeful expression. Seeing Doc entering with the tackle box, his expression turned to one of deep indignation.

"Hoped you'd got lost," he said sourly.

Smiling pleasantly, Doc set the tackle box on the battered desk. "Come to swap your old tackle box for that sword."

"Git!" MacLoyd gritted. "I got somethin' else to do besides listenin' to you run off at the mouth. With folks yappin' their heads off about the bank robbery, I—"

Doc dumped the burgular tools on the desk with a clatter.

MacLoyd's pale eyes popped. "What's them?" he husked.

Doc explained. He told about seeing the yellow mud on the buggy wheels and how he had raked the tools out of the creek.

"I knowed them jaspers was guilty all the time!" MacLoyd declared, leaping to his feet and grabbing up his six-gun. "I'll show the varmits a thing or—"

"Only trouble is," Doc interrupted placidly, "you can't prove it. All you got are these tools, which don't mean a thing. Even the mud's washed off the buggy wheels."

The sheriff slacked his six feet of skin and bones back into his chair. He looked as if he'd lost all his relatives, including a rich uncle who had forgotten to mention him in his will. He swore feebly and hopelessly.

"Of course," Doc went on, "if you're willin' to swap that Civil War sword for your tackle box an'—"

"Doc," the sheriff said hoarsely, "if you can help me get the bank's money back an'—"

BRIEFLY Doc outlined his plan. A few minutes later, the two old cronies, Doc lugging a contraption covered with a horse blanket, and MacLoyd carrying a pump rod, the lariat and a rusty pair of tinsnips, walked without knocking into the real estate office of R. R. Hopkins.

Mr. Hopkins glanced up with a look of surprise, which quickly turned to alarm upon finding himself staring into the business end of Sheriff MacLoyd's six-shooter.

He started to his feet, but MacLoyd barked, "Sit down!"

Mr. Hopkins sat down. Doc took the lariat and tied the man firmly to his chair. Then he removed the horse blanket from the contraption he'd been carrying. It was the fly trap swarming with outraged and angry bees. Mr. Hopkins' face went white.

"Remembered you said you'd rather be bit by a rattler than stung by a bee," Doc said. "Bee stings poison you, an'—"

"Take 'em outa here!" Mr. Hopkins said hoarsely.

"Mr. Hopkins," Doc went on grimly. "I'm goin' to cut the bottom out of this fly trap. Then the sheriff an' me'll step just outside the door an' I'll upset the trap with this pump rod. Them bees are shore plenty riled."

Doc took the tinsnips and approached the trap.

"They'll sting me!" Mr. Hopkins husked. "They'll poison—"

"Maybe," Doc said, "you'd like to tell us where you an' your partner hid the bank's money."

He began to cut the bottom of the fly trap with the snips.

"I'll talk!" Mr. Hopkins bleated. "Just stop cuttin' that screen an' listen. You'll find Dunlap in his room at the hotel, takin' a nap. I'll show you where we hid the money."

An hour later, the money recovered and the two strangers safely locked up, MacLoyd and Doc sat in the dingy two-by-four jail office.

"Doc," the sheriff said, "it's shore nice to have you back home. I shore missed you when—"

His voice trailed off, for Doc had dug an envelope from his pocket and was fishing something from it.

"Sheriff," Doc said smugly, "I want some boot along with that sword. A pane of glass for my busted kitchen window."

MacLoyd sent an angry, sizzling stream of tobacco juice into the battered spittoon. "Doc, you can go straight to—"

"Found this where the feller stood who tossed a rock through the window." Doc laid a faded red shirt button on the desk. "I call it Exhibit A. I reckon you lost it when you was pryin' that rock loose to throw through my—"

"Doc," MacLoyd roared, "why didn't you stay in Philadelphia the rest of your life, you fat, schemin', no-account, hoss stealin' ole—"

He ran out of breath and had to stop. Then a slow grin spread across his bony face. "Well," he added, "I had to do somethin' that'd give you an excuse to come here so's we could get into a swap without losin' any time."

Doc threw back his head and haw-hawed.

"Just forget about that window pane, Sheriff," he said.

Then, after looking carefully about to make sure no one was observing them, Doc Swap and Sheriff MacLoyd stood and shook hands warmly.

Lore of the West

WESTERN animals are tough! At a dude ranch near Cody, Wyoming, there is a "tame" deer which smokes cigars. He prefers that someone light the cigar for him first, then he'll puff happily on it for minutes at a time. Some city dude taught him the trick one summer.

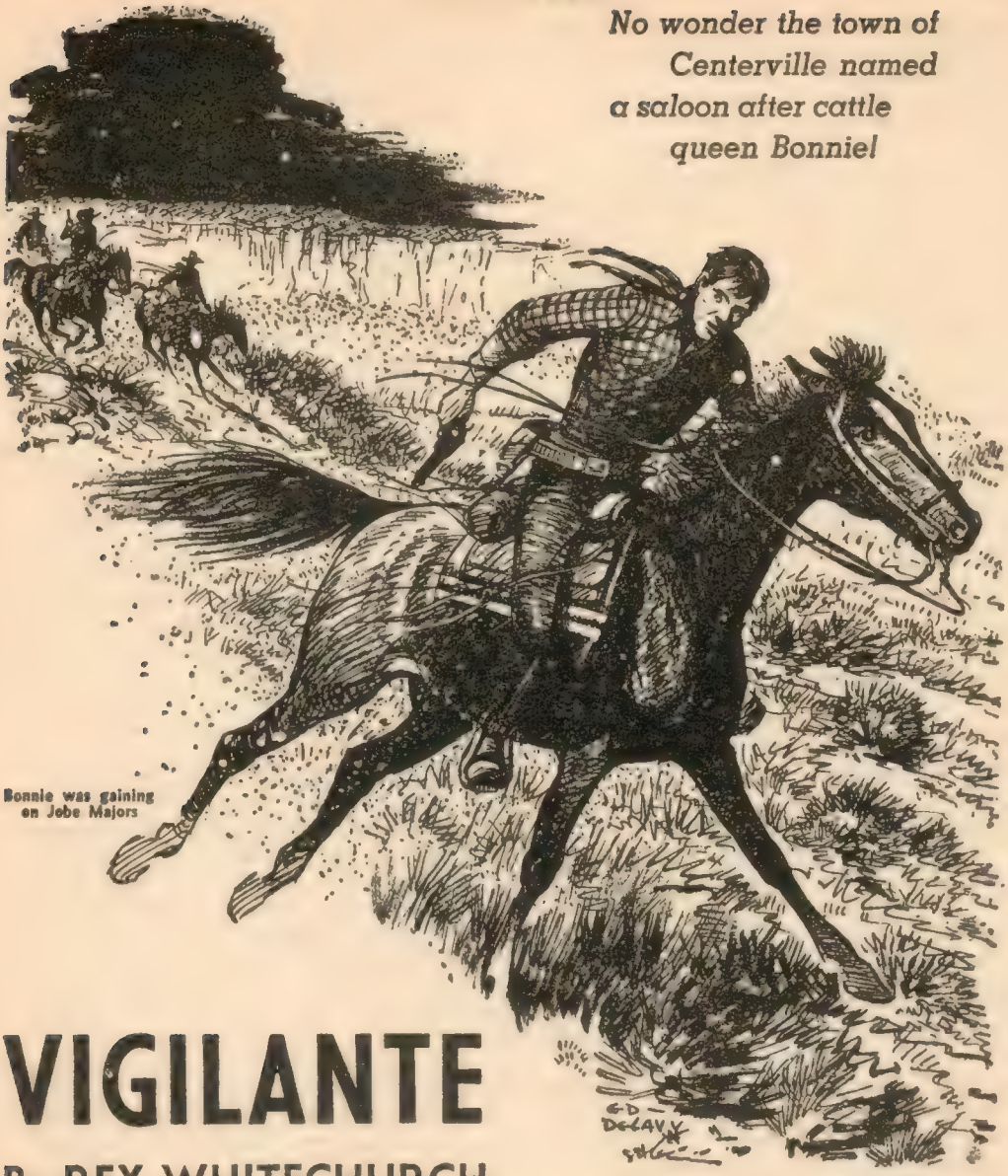
EVER wonder why most cowmen, even today, wear loud checkered shirts? It's because generally the colors and designs actually camouflage the dust which a rider can't help picking up on the trail.

SEEMINGLY useless, barrel cactus which grows in our Western deserts is good for at least two things. It makes a fairly reliable compass. Better than eighty per cent of the time this peculiar plant inclines toward the south. Also, adequate moisture for quenching thirst can be squeezed out of the pulp.

THERE was once a tavern keeper out West whose name was Burrell. Neighboring stockmen knew his place as Burrell's Inn and in time as the vicinity prospered, the settlement took on the name of Burl Inn because of the speech habits of the inhabitants. A few generations and the name was further distorted. Today there is a Berlin, Oregon!

—Simpson Ritter

No wonder the town of Centerville named a saloon after cattle queen Bonniel



Bonnie was gaining on Jobe Majors

VIGILANTE

By REX WHITECHURCH

IT WAS EVENING and the sun was a magnified cherry in a sky as blue as an ocean, and white-capped clouds floated across the eastern vista. From afar the fragrance of prairie grass reached me. The Old Scout lolled in his chair and gazed reminiscently off up the street from the porch of the ancient hotel. This cowtown in which I had been billeted for the week by the commission company that employed me, had played a stirring part in the story of the cattlemen against the sodbusters.

The Old Scout suddenly looked suspiciously at me and said, "Am I boring you, young man? Is it old stuff I have been telling you about Jobe Majors? Have you heard about Jobe before or mebbe

read about him in some book? No. I just naturally don't think so. Jobe was one of them fellows that did a lot of good and probably a little bad and wasn't remembered. If you care to hear the rest of it—"

"Go on," I said quickly. "I never heard of Jobe. I never even heard of this town until a month ago. The war between the farmers and the cattlemen isn't new; it's only Jobe and of course the girl that you were telling me about—the girl who bossed this town and had Jobe tied to a moving wagon and flogged him with a bullwhip all the way up to that bandstand in the intersection—that's the story, Scout. That's what I want you to tell me about."

I peered across the street at a sign that swung over batwings and read: "Bonnie Hubbell's Saloon." I knew that Bonnie was the cattle queen who had been a regular Joan of Arc to her people, and I could understand why they had named the place in her honor. The Scout took me over there last night. He wanted to show me how sumptuous it was. The walls had garish murals on them. The bar was a hundred feet long. I counted twenty mirrors in the room; and the Scout showed me a bullet-hole in the wall. He led me to understand the bullet-hole was important. They had preserved it all the years since Bonnie Hubbell's day.

The Old Scout was a fixture in this town. He said to call him Scout. He had been with Custer and Fremont and had taken an active part in General Reno's biggest battles. He knew all about the war between the cavalrymen and the various tribes of Indians. I hadn't had time to make any definite inquiries about him, but I planned to do this as soon as I could get around to it. He was tall and fairly straight and had high cheekbones and unusually bright gray eyes. I could imagine him as being a handsome man fifty years ago.

"Poor little Centerville, busiest place in Kansas fifty years ago," the Scout declaimed. "She was full of hell and brimstone while she lasted. She died one night; she died when a gun was fired and after that she lost all her importance and took a back seat and stopped growin'. Wasn't nothin' like her, I'm tellin' you. Never was; never will be again."

He paused to light a cigar. His white shirt was immaculate. He wore no coat, just an open vest over his shirt, and a little black shoestring tie. His black trousers had creases in them as sharp as a saber blade. With the cigar going again, he settled back in his chair. He clasped his long, blue-veined hands across his stomach and began to speak softly with a stern expression on what had been a harsh, strong face.

I ALLOW I'd better start at the beginning, when Centerville was a year old and Jobe Majors was twenty-three. That was before the boy distinguished himself in the war against the Indians. A right nice little cowtown, the last stop cattlemen made with their herds before reaching Saint Joe. It's thirty miles from here, across the Missouri River, to the stockyards which in 1869, offered one of the biggest markets in the Middle West. All you could see along the roads and along the narrow trails, were cattle, with drovers yelling behind them and ahead of them and in the middle of them. Cowboys would sing out to the Longhorns like those steers from Texas could understand their words.

No—Centerville never did grow out of short pants. It might have been a different story if the vigilantes hadn't got too hot behind their collars here. They turned blood crazy. The morning they mistook Jobe Majors for a horse thief and tried to lynch him half the population was in the group. They overhauled Jobe riding a Morgan stallion that he claimed he bought from a man named Wayne Gray at the Palace Saloon. That's the one over there. Of course it's the Bonnie Hubbell now.

But a cowboy, David Clegg, said he had seen Jobe take the horse. The man Jobe said had owned the nag was dead. He had been drygulched in the alley there beside the hotel. Banker Jim Allerdice stated that Gray had been with him only a few minutes before his body was found. The murder had attracted attention to Jobe, and pronto—a hundred men were on his trail, led by Bonnie Hubbell.

Jobe was on his way home. His father had fifty acres two miles south of here. Because they were farmers they were suspected of being worse by the cattlemen. Bonnie's father, old Kent, had

wanted a son. That's an old story. But the girl was loved by her sire and he didn't try to make her life hard for her. It was she, who early in life, decided to be both a son and a daughter to Kent.

Bonnie was slim-made, had a deep bosom and a sapling form, just as supple as a willow, just as graceful. Even sun and wind and snow seemed friendly to her unparalleled complexion. Her eyes were the color of the sky up over our heads right now. And she had a proud high-headed spirit.

But Bonnie Hubbell knew one thing. If she ever married, she would have to choose a husband from the cattlemen, for to fall in love with a sodbuster would be to sign old Kent's death warrant. You know a girl like Bonnie can have a sacrificing love for the parent of her deepest affection.

Tough! I know men who to this day will tell you she grew into it. She bossed the Bar X with a bullwhip and those cowboys were more scared of her than of old Kent who was a voracious cannibal when it came to disobedient weaklings.

Well, Bonnie led the vigilantes—Bonnie and Jess Whitten, old Kent's imported gunfighter. Jess was tough, too, but he never spoke in Bonnie's presence without first being addressed by her. The farmers had aroused old Kent's ire and he had taken the matter up with the authorities at Topeka. He wanted the sodbusters banished from his part of the state which, he said, God had made for cattle country. The slender, tawny haired lioness of a girl was Kent Hubbell's chief executive.

What augmented Jobe's peril was his natural born recklessness and desperation. He had slammed two shots at his pursuers, thinking, he said later, that he was being chased by renegades. One of his bullets raked Bonnie; blood wet her face. She was gaining on Jobe, and right behind her was Jess Whitten. Their running horses had their necks stretched out as far as they could get them and their tails were stertched out the same way. It seemed as though their flying hoofs were off the ground all the time.

When Jobe was almost to the timber his horse gave out and he dropped out of the saddle. He still tried to reach those scrub trees and he ran in his coarse boots over the ground, whirling once to take another shot at the yelling, hard riding mob. He was less than twenty feet from the trees when Bonnie and Jess rode him down.

There wasn't much talk. Everything was left to Bonnie. She sat in her saddle on her blue roan and dabbed at the blood on her cheek. Jobe's eyes looked up at her. He was a right handsome youngster, clad in sweaty blue jeans, with a sagging shell belt around his waist. Men who rode with Bonnie that night knew he had a solid, honest appearing face, with a level, keen gaze. His reddish brown hair glinted in the moonlight and sweat made globules on his upper lip.

JOBE seemed to know his life was in Bonnie's hands. Back in Kentucky where he'd come from with his parents and three brothers, he had lived in the woods and hunted and farmed and he had seen all types of tough men; but he had never seen a tough woman like the one he was beholding now; it just hadn't ever happened.

The dust was still swirling in smoke density and they were all cross and mean. Their horses were rearing and stinking with the steam coming off their hides, and some of the riders were galled. Those are the times when men get real hard.

It was funny that Bonnie sat so long without saying anything. Abruptly then she moved, lashing out with her whip. There was a fly on Jobe's right cheek. She got the fly. Jobe didn't move. Men who saw that incident say he didn't even blink his eyes.

"Are you an owlhoot?" the boy asked quietly. "I've heard about women bandits and pirates, read about them in story books. But I've never seen a real live one—not until now."

There wasn't a sign of guilt or cowardice in his voice.

"I'm a vigilante," Bonnie said, still dabbing with a white handkercheif at her wound. "You killed a man and stole his horse. It's a hanging offense out here. Didn't you have sense enough to know it couldn't be done in a town like Centerville? I guess, though, like all the other clodbusters, you don't have much more sense than a smart horse, maybe not as much. We've got a rope here and

we're going to hang you. Turn over that gun; just remove the belt and drop it on the ground."

Jobe had been trying to see through this maze of distorted circumstances and, when Bonnie had elucidated, he quickly stepped back a pace. "You've got the wrong mule by the tail," he said, still in a placid voice. "I'm not your huckleberry. I bought that Morgan for fifty dollars and I've got the receipt in my pocket to back me up."

Some of the riders crowded their horses up closer around him. A rope was brandished and waved back and forth before him, the big ugly noose showing in all its ghastly prominence. The cowboy who carried it made as though to drop the noose over Jobe's head. Bonnie's voice stopped him.

"Let me see the receipt," she said, with an imperious air. "None of us here want to lynch an innocent person. But—if you're lying, we'll hang you by inches and feed you to the carrion birds, mister."

Well, you can bet they were all amazed. Jim Allerdice, the Centerville banker, scoffed, but he felt pretty low and wasn't sure of himself.

"Why, dangnation, Bonnie," Allerdice remonstrated, "what has come over you? Can't you see he's lying? Isn't the man he says sold him the Morgan stone dead, ambushed; and isn't it true that the stolen horse is right over there grazing on the lovely green grass this farmer and his kind are tryin' to plow under the black dirt? What else do you need in the way of proof? I'll tell you, as a respected citizen of Centerville I don't like this."

Very slow and methodical was Bonnie Hubbell when she took the receipt and inspected it. She still was dabbing at the bloody furrow in her cheek; and she said, with a cold candor and calm that keenly matched the excellent composure of their intended victim, "Get back away from him, boys! This receipt is genuine!"

Then to weld her decision into hard steel, Bonnie Hubbell added, "There was exactly fifty dollars in Gray's pocket and that confirms this clodbuster's story. He's free. Let him go. He knows this is cattle country out here but that we're fair and honest." She just stared at Jobe Majors and their eyes met again, and they locked and they gazed through each other. Some of the witnesses swear that when Bonnie looked away her face turned to a light shade of pink that was as delicate in its hue as a woman's silken undergarment.

Jobe didn't argue; he wasn't the nettlesome kind. He stomped over to his Morgan, swung into leather and rode slowly over the ridge.

BUT that was simply the beginning. In two weeks, Jobe was back in Centerville and spending his money at the Palace Saloon. Bonnie loafed there, some figgered more to keep up her plan to keep her father satisfied that she was as good and capable as any son he could have had. Kent had an interest in the establishment and the vigilantes made it their headquarters, and when Bonnie was in town she was usually to be found there.

Jim Allerdice was in his late thirties, a blond, slender gent, with green eyes that sometimes took on the glitter and shape of a tomcat's. He, too, frequented the Palace, but as many knew, it was to be near Bonnie.

She avoided him. She bucked the roulette wheel and challenged faro. Occasionally she would come up to the bar near Jobe and drink a bottle of sarsaparilla, but she never looked his way. Old Man Tyler, the newspaper editor, opined that a woman like Bonnie acted that way only when she was in love.

"Hang it, tarnation," was Tyler's byword. "Didn't she save his neck—sure? And you know Bonnie Hubbell. It wasn't sympathy; it was love at first sight. So —you watch and see what happens."

But there were those in the miniature town of falsefronts that resembled toy buildings cut out of cardboard, who believed otherwise. Wasn't she engaged to marry Allerdice? What was eating on Old Tyler. How could a girl with a half million dollars look upon a common clodbuster with love in her eyes? Besides, hadn't she called this farm boy a clodbuster?

You can bet Allerdice got to worrying. He wanted Bonnie and she kept putting him off. She wanted to be free, she said. She didn't want to settle down and have kids and have to wear corsets and dresses.

It was too early. She wished to wait until she had seen more of life. But in her way she had practically consented to marry Jim Allerdice in a few years at the longest. Big moneyed man that he was, with evil power and capable of matching the devil's own machinations, he was worried. He knew he couldn't make Bonnie love him, if she didn't love him. He might remove every obstacle in his path to her side and then not win her love.

Some of Tyler's philosophy had begun to reach the banker. He was an indignant man when Jobe Majors eventually made up his mind to renew his acquaintance with Bonnie. The farmer stamped over to where she was loitering against the piano and, doffing his flat crowned hat and rubbing his other hand on his hickory shirt, he sedately announced that he would like to buy another bottle of sarsaparilla.

To the genuine astonishment of all those present there that hot day, Bonnie Hubbell condescended to drink with a farmer. Grim featured cowboys looked on and were angry. Bonnie was their representative. She had been in diplomatic relationship with the dignitaries at Topeka, working for the cattlemen's interests, trying to banish the sodbusters from the grazing lands of Kansas. And now here she was, pollywogging with a dirt farmer, and evidently and very, very ostensibly, enjoying it.

David Clegg, the cowboy who had seen Jobe take the Morgan from the hitchrack, got half drunk and decided to take matters into his own hands.

Sidling along the bar he stopped less than two feet from Jobe and without a word of warning, busted him in the nose.

BONNIE, furious and dynamic in her effort to protect Jobe, or to prevent a fight tried to push Clegg away, but the cowboy was sufficently inebriated to forget the dignified position she held with his friends.

"Go on, Bonnie," he grated. "I don't like to see you standin' up here and drinkin' with a sodbuster right out where everyone can see you. It ain't right. He killed Gray and stole his Morgan, and the whole community's sayin' the reason you didn't let us hang him was because you fell in love with him. Well—I'm going to spoil his looks just to be safe—"

Just then Jobe quietly stepped around Bonnie and sledged him right between the eyes. The impact sent Clegg reeling down the full length of the bar. He would have dropped if two of his cronies hadn't caught him in time to prevent it. They held him up a minute.

"Look out!"

It was the banker who called out the warning to Clegg. Jobe was sweeping in on the cowboy with the alacrity of an enraged mountain cat. They came together again when Clegg's friends gave him a volcanic shove toward his antagonist. It was a terrific collision.

They battled a good ten minutes. There was so much blood on the floor they both slipped and fell down, and got up, and Clegg lost four front teeth, which he spat into a cuspidor. They hammered each other this way and that, up and down and across the room, with men scrambling out of their way so as not to accidentally get in the path of one of those man killing blows. They were soaked with sweat, too; there wasn't a place on them where they had escaped punishment. Clegg was a mite faster on his feet and maneuvered Jobe up against the bar and there he whaled away with both slugging fists at the sodbuster's unguarded chin.

Jobe had difficulty in getting out of the trap. Maybe the farmer was a mite slower but he hit the hardest. Clegg tried to ram a fist into his face that would have knocked the bar over had it landed on Jobe. The latter moved his head quickly and the pile driver grazed his ear. He buried his right into Clegg's bread-basket. The cowpoke lurched and lit on his knees. Jobe ran around him. He did not attempt to shelf his man when he had him down.

Two cowmen grabbed at Jobe Majors. A farmer standing near the big unfired stove in the middle of the room, seized the poker from the woodbox. He catapulted straight at Jobe's new antagonists. Before he could be stopped, he cracked one of their heads.

Bonnie again intervened. "There's going to be no more trouble here. I don't care what you say or do outside, but the trouble's over so far as the Palace is concerned. These sodbusters are free to walk out of here. They didn't start the

fight. We're not going to resort to physical violence to obtain our rights. Let the authorities decide the matter. Topeka will be heard from in due time." She looked at Jobe's bleeding face. He placidly stuffed his shirttail into his pants.

Glancing across at the farmer who had come to his aid, he said, "Thanks, Tom. I guess she's right. Let's leave here and not bother them. They seem to be fair and square shooters. The way I see it, we farmers have got to be the same way."

Jobe squared himself around. "Thank you," he said to Bonnie. "We'll avoid trouble as long as we can. If the cattle owners were all like you, I'm sure the problem could be solved without bloodshed. That little fifty acres out there is the only home we've got. The man who used the poker in my defense is my brother. I tell you that so you will understand."

Bonnie did not answer. But those who witnessed the event said she turned a trifle pink again.

THE next day Jim Allerdice rode out to the Majors place, a level piece of bottom land. From afar he sat his bay and watched Jobe plowing a furrow. All but the share was made of wood; but pulled by a ribby gray work horse the blade bit deep into the black soil.

Jobe must have seen the banker and, taking the worn lines from around his waist, he walked over to the rail fence. There was a brown demijohn of water on a strap swung over a cross rail. He nodded briefly, but was reluctant to renew acquaintance with the man who had been hostile to him when the vigilantes had ridden him down. He sensed in Allerdice a strange, compelling enmity.

"You'd make a good cowpuncher." The banker gave Jobe a quick, appraising look. "You'd make more money in the saddle than behind that crude plow."

This deceptive conversational tone did not warm Jobe to the man. He frowned and rubbed his hands together. "I'm not a cowboy," he retorted sedately. "I've never wanted to be one. I'm doing what I like best now. You seem to be more interested in the cattlemen than in the farmers. I always figgered a banker should be impartial."

Alledice was tired and troubled and irritable. He took his hat off and ran a pale hand through his yellow hair. Then he began to toy idly with the elkstooth charm on his watch-chain.

"Pilgrim," he gloated, "I thank the stars I don't have to make a living like you do. But I guess it takes a raw kind of courage; and to tell the truth, I'm beginning to admire you. Would you like to have me make a loan on your land here? I'd advance you as much as five hundred dollars for twelve months."

Jobe turned gray eyes upon him. The bay nickered and stirred restlessly and his side was wet because of the agonizing heat of the sun. A coppery hue lay over the earth. The furrows across the scorched field lay straight and black and rich. Beyond a small ridge was the chimney of the house, and beyond this the gabled end of a weed-tinted barn. There was an unpainted windmill but the wheel wasn't turning. The sky line was pink as coral, with a few vivid lemon hued ribbons rippling across it. The loneliness of the pastoral atmosphere could be felt.

"Nope, we're not borrowing." Jobe removed his hands from the toprail and mopped sweat out of his face. He tied his red bandanna back around his neck. "Gray—the man who sold me the Morgan —said he had to have fifty dollars for you. If he didn't sell his horse you would foreclose on him. We don't want to do business with banks. Not till we've got something to do business with."

Allerdice bent down out of his saddle and peered curiously into Jobe's eyes.

"You've got a lot of nerve."

He dropped the elk's tooth and the vermilion sun glinted off the heavy gold chain. "But you're up against a losing game," the banker insisted.

"You'll be run out of the country. The cattlemen are mad, and it's not likely that Topeka will take any hand in the matter. Trouble will break loose with the report from those authorities. You'll have to abandon this farm, and the money you've got invested in it will be a total loss. If I took it I'd turn it back into grazing land. Look at the rich grass you're plowing under."

Jobe jerked his head as if a bee had stung him. The sweet fragrance of the prairie grass was in his nostrils, and he

liked it. Without speaking again, he wheeled and stomped back to his wooden plow, stopping now and then to break a black clod with his heel.

The banker's eyes narrowed and then he spurred his horse away. He did not look back either.

WELL, there must have been born in the ominous brain of Jim Allerdice the scheme that caused all the trouble; he had been frustrated by Jobe's determined attitude. At any rate, along toward morning the whole Majors outfit awakened to find their barns in flames and their haystacks crackling cauldrons. Jobe rushed out with a shotgun and was driven back into the house by a raking rifle fire. A cordon of riders swarmed around the building, brandishing and discharging pistols.

One of them screeched, "Get out of Kansas or die!"

Another raider yelled, "The next time we'll kill you!"

And still another put in his penny's worth, "Farmers are not wanted in Donovan County!"

Jobe and his three brothers returned bullet for bullet; and the horde of maudlin men dashed away, their horses running into a thunder of disturbance. All night the family sought to stem the tide of the leaping flames and succeeded only in saving the livestock and the house.

Jobe appeared in town that afternoon and he went straight to the bank. He had been there before. He knew where the banker stayed, in his back office.

Allerdice must have figgered that the devil had broken loose for sure. When Jobe got through with him, the man was bleeding profusely and unconscious on the floor. Jobe ran from the building, jumping down the steps; but already a warning had been shouted and a cowbell had jangled and the avalanche of scurrying vigilantes closed in on the longlegged young man. Smoky dust rose in the street as the pack swarmed around the captured farmer. The frightened cashier had called for help.

Jobe had tried running for it, but when overhauled in the intersection he tried fighting; he was overcome by the superior odds against him. The vigilantes were blazing mad. They hurled Jobe to the ground and held him until more cohorts joined them and they tromped him and when he was yanked to his feet, he was in such a befuddled state he didn't know what was going on around him. He was propped up against a wagon and held there, pinned helplessly and suffering extreme agony.

Jim Allerdice came wobbling down the stone steps. He pointed a bejeweled finger at the wounded, bedraggled Jobe. "Tie him to that wagon! Start the team off up the street, and get me a blacksnake whip. I intend to flog him to death! I'll make him remember what he has done to me if he lives to be a hundred years old. But that won't happen. I aim to whip him until he dies."

Jobe was shoved around until they succeeded in binding his hands to the endgate of the wagon. A man flashed a whip and cracked it over Jobe's head; the snapping lash made a gunshot effect. There was anxiety in the eyes of the spectators and malevolence, too. Cowboys in gay shirts raced their ponies up and down the street and waved their hats in gala exuberance.

Just then, however, Bonnie Hubbell came stomping down the sidewalk past the line of spectators who were gathered under the board awning. She was sweating until her thin gauzelike shirt was transparent and her lion colored hair streamed down her back.

Without a word she snatched the blacksnake whip away from Allerdice. "This is my job," she said in cold acrimony. "I'm going to relish it. They've been telling around town that I am in love with this clodbuster. Now I'm going to show them. Start the wagon and drive slow. I'll cut his back to pieces."

It was a strange procession that moved off down the thoroughfare, and it seemed the tiny falsefronts crouched low and hid their faces in shame. Dust smeared the bare back of the badly beaten Jobe; blood ran out of his wounds and caked, with the dust acting as salt to those raw, open slashes in his flesh. Bonnie, grim and sweating more than ever and striding angrily behind the wagon, laid the whip on with brutal force.

BUT not a word came from Jobe Majors. Finally, at the end of the

block, Bonnie cried out, "Stop the team and unleash the farmer. He's had enough. God help him if he ever sets foot in Centerville again."

To the astonishment of everybody there Jobe did not fall down. He had big welts all over his back, and there were deep crimson spots and skinned places on his stomach where the end of the lash had bitten deeper into his flesh. He had blood on his hands and his face was besmeared with it. But he wasn't quite unconscious.

He took two tigerish steps toward Bonnie. He was white as snow in the face where the blood hadn't touched it; there was a cruel mad glitter in his eyes. No, it wasn't precisely cruel; it was just madness brought on by the acute suffering he had experienced. Sweat plastered his hair to his skull. Lines too deep for a young man were carved around his distorted mouth.

"Last night," he said, trying to check his anger, "you tried to impress me with your lies. You said the cattlemen were willing to leave the matter to the Topeka authorities and that they would not resort to violence. You said you were not going to take any hand in a bloody feud, or something like that. Fine! That was a good speech; but only lies came from your lips; dirty, miserable, disarming lies.

"Last night you sent your so-called vigilantes out to our place. You burned the barns and the haystacks and fired guns at us. I recognized the leader of the mob. Today I came here to square up with him, to collect the debt he owed me. Being a banker I figgered he would understand!"

Tumult showed in Bonnie's face. She shook her almost nude shoulders. She mopped sweat and yellow dust out of her eyes and left a wide white steak across her forehead. Imperious pride and arrogance came into her attitude. She whirled and stared at the numbed witnesses to this grim ritual.

The bruises on Jobe's body began to throb. He covered his face with his flattened palms and tears ran through his fingers. He was a sick man, shutting out the sight of the world. He was fatigued, exhausted; he could endure no more suffering. The livid anger subsided. The fury that had carried him this far went away and left him nauseated and trembling on his legs.

Turning toward the girl who was statuesque before him, he said slowly, "I'm sorry it was you who did this to me. It was like seeing the wings of an angel disappear and the horns of the devil come in their place. I guess I've been hurt bad, but for every lick you struck me a million hours of anguish will collect payment from you."

She watched him, slant eyed, whispering, "You fool—why did you come back here and jump him? He would have whipped you to death. How do I know you've told me the truth? How can you prove—if it did happen—that Jim led the mob?"

Allerdice slithered up to Jobe and the murmuring crowd in the hot sun and dust fell back away from him.

"You're whipped," the banker droned. "You're whipped in every way, Majors. Now you get out of this town and you stay out of it. She told you the truth. I would have beaten you to death with that whip. If you ever come back here the vigilantes will string you up. You'd better get out while you can."

A RIDER loped into the intersection and flung himself to the ground. Tom Majors came stomping indignantly up to the group and courageously elbowed his way into the center of the throng. Heavy dust clouds rolled over the street, then hung motionless in the burning air. Bonnie Hubbell's eyes became alert and reflective.

The big rider's voice sang out, "Vigilantes? A bunch of stupid, blind animals! What have you done to Jobe? A brave set of vultures you are. I can lick any two of you in this mob with my bare hands. But you wouldn't give me fair play. You'd treat me like you've treated him. Last night you burned us out. Today you have horsewhipped my brother. You don't want farmers here and you're willing to commit murders without end to keep them out. Jobe—who whipped you?"

Allerdice bristled up. "You get out! Both of you get out, or we'll commence some of that murdering right now!"

Bonnie interposed. "Jobe, you say Allerdice led those raiders last night. Can you prove it? Tell me how you can prove it, Jobe."

Nobody had ever heard Bonnie Hubbell speak like that; her voice was soft and tender and she seemed on the verge of breaking out in tears. A tremor moved her lips into a helpless quivering. Her eyes had begun to shine with a weird luster. Her mouth was moving against her grief.

Jobe stared at her. There was no fear in him, but he felt a peculiar numbness all through him.

He knew everything hinged on his answer to her question.

"He had his hat pulled down," he ventured. "He was dressed rough like a cowboy. He had a vest on and I saw his elktooth watchcharm."

Silence waited and beat with a drumming that oppressed the spectators and held them tense.

"There's more than one such watch charm," argued Allerdice. "But—you're lying, you big clodbuster! You're lying!"

Tom Majors shoved him back. The banker reeled off into the arms of a man on the inner circle. "No, he ain't lyin'." Tom declared. Where's your elk tooth, Mister? You got your watch chain on. Where's your charm?"

Allerdice glanced down and in that moment he lost his color and went as pale as alabaster.

"Here," Tom continued, his voice cool, "is this what you're looking for? I picked it up in the yard this morning. You lost it when a tree branch snared it, Mister Banker. Look at it! Everybody have a look! I think I see a rope noose in it!" On the palm of his opened hand was the missing elk tooth charm.

Bonnie gasped, was momentarily bewildered and got her composure back. "Jim," she rasped, and her voice was brutally hard, "where's your elk tooth?"

Jobe saw conflict in Allerdice's expression. Across his vest was a gold chain and in it a little gold ring that had once held the watch-charm. It wasn't difficult to see how it had happened.

"I don't know," Allerdice admitted. "I must have left it at home."

Jobe said, droning out his words, "Allerdice, you bet on the wrong mule. You've got your neck in that noose Tom mentioned."

"Get him!"

The crying, screaming voices all screeched the same words. There was a frenzied shuffling and jostling and grabbing, but the banker eluded the clamoring hands. He smashed through the crowd. He ran a straight course over the board walk to the Palace Saloon.

The mob was close upon his heels. He raced through the door and the bat wings plopped shut behind him. Boot heels beat a tattoo on the planks when the mob hit the sidewalk. Just then a shot thundered inside the saloon. Jim Allerdice fell forward away from the wall. He had been poised there. A smoking gun dropped from his nerveless fingers into the scarlet sawdust.

They found the bullet-hole. Yep—the slug went clean through his head.

THE Old Scout ceased speaking and looked at his watch and I saw an elktooth charm on the chain across his black vest. "That was the end of the war of the cattlemen against the sodbusters," he said. He got up. "That's why they preserve that bullet-hole in the Bonnie Hubbell. Yep, Jobe married her. Old Kent gave his consent. I guess he figgered that whipping Bonnie gave Jobe was wrong and—well, you jist don't know how a man figgers things out, sometimes. I've seen 'em do some crazy things. But that whipping saved Jobe's life. The reason she done it herself was because she knew Allerdice would kill him. She had to make it look good."

He crossed the porch, looked down the street. "I've got to be going. I run the hardware store over there. Look me up before you leave town. My name's Jobe Majors."

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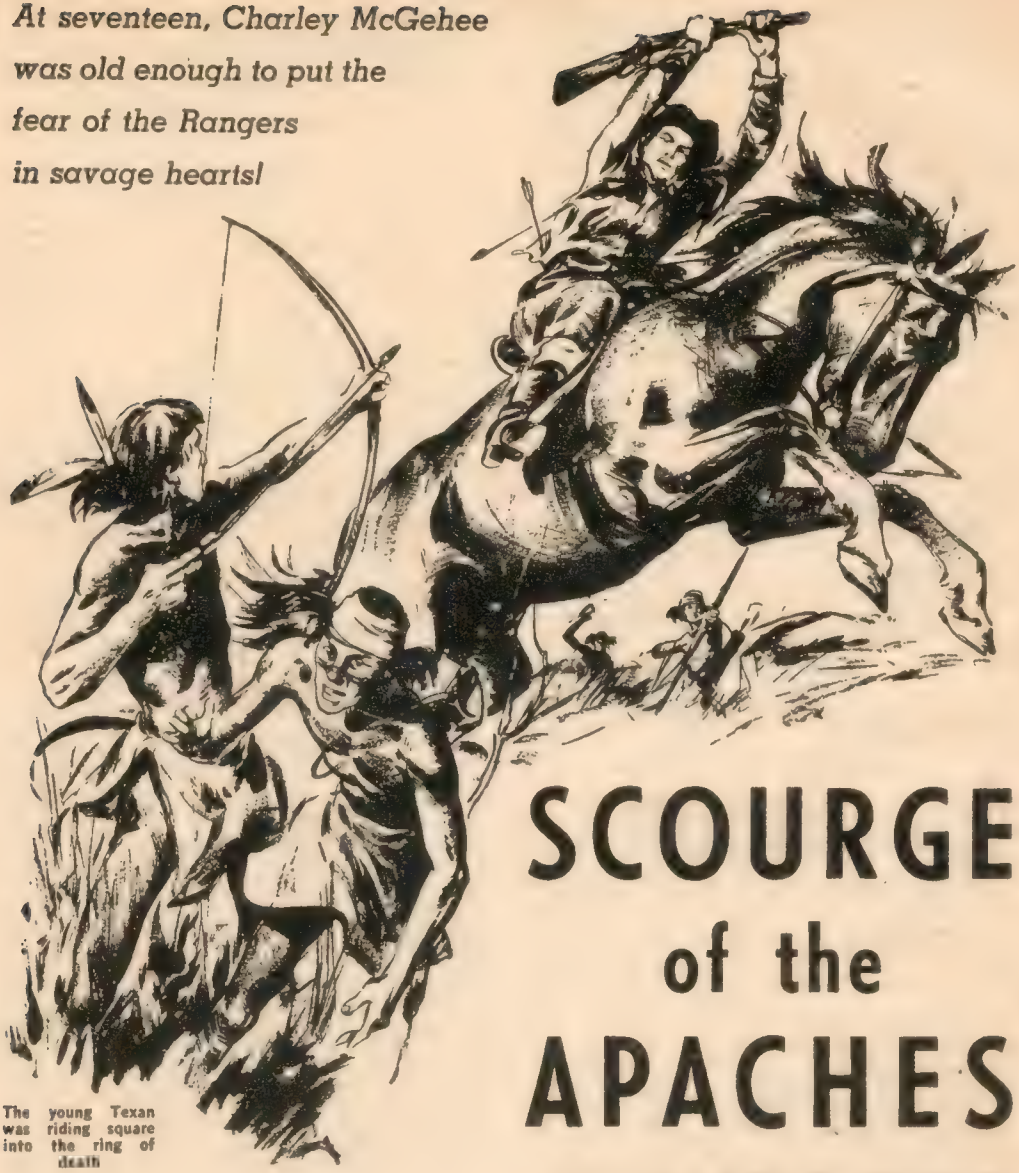
At seventeen, Charley McGehee was old enough to put the fear of the Rangers in savage hearts!



The young Texan was riding square into the ring of death

SCOURGE of the APACHES

By HAROLD PREECE

WHEN he heard the owls hooting —strangely, by day—the lone rider quickly reined up his mount. He listened intently, sniffing the air as the eerie cries grew louder across the canyon. Owls were nocturnal creatures, neither seen nor heard during the waking hours of men.

Charley McGehee, the runaway range kid, realized that he was hearing something else besides the big birds calling to each other. Swiftly, he pulled his horse

The True Story of a Famous Texas Ranger

into the shelter of a pecan grove and loaded his rifle. His gun was pointed and ready, when twelve red warriors rose from the ravine and charged toward him.

A shower of arrows whizzed past his face. One cut a saddle cinch, another severed a low branch of a tree. Dismounting, the youngster waited until the Indians were a scant six yards away.

The shrill whine of his rifle answered the steady hum of the winged missiles plowing the ground about him. The minor chief leading this Apache plundering party fell, grasping at his chest, when the boy's first bullet found its mark. Two more warriors staggered off, wounded, into the brush. The surprised Apaches fell back a few yards and began muttering among themselves. Then one of them threw back his head and let out a loud trumpeting cry that echoed back like thunder from the canyon walls.

The Presence of Death

The lad in the thicket heard answering calls from every direction. Instinctively, he sensed that the Apaches meant to surround him. This first assault had been merely a sortie to locate him by drawing his fire. A young Texan stood in the presence of certain death, and death is an unpleasant prospect at seventeen.

In that moment, he made his decision. If death it was to be, he would carry to eternity with him all the Apaches one gun would account for. He jumped on his horse and dug spurs deep into its flanks. The pony crashed forward and headed straight toward the eleyen warriors.

The Indians closed in in a solid phalanx of destruction as McGehee advanced. His first bullet cut the bowstring of a six-foot warrior aiming at him. The second struck the warrior in the chest, leaving a great, gaping wound. Then the young Texan was riding square into the ring of death, using his rifle butt as a club for the fierce, close fighting that followed.

Tomahawks sailed by his head, arrows cut his shirt into long, jagged ribbons. But steadily the Apaches gave way before the fury of his attack, until only three were in sight. Then weapons worse than arrows were concentrated on him as reinforcing bodies of Indians sprang up from the grass.

McGehee had one cartridge left against a hundred enemy warriors encircling him, and the Apaches were armed with high-powered rifles purchased from renegade gun-runners along the Red River. He leaned low in his saddle, straddling his horse's side and grasping its mane with his right hand in an effort to escape the volley. It was a trick he'd learned from friendly Tonkawa Indians during long months of riding and scouting with them.

His heart sickened as he felt the saddle slip and give way. It had been held precariously by one cinch since the start of the battle. The saddle ripped loose when an Apache bullet smashed its horn. It fell, with the boy underneath. He struggled to extricate himself, then picked up his gun lying nearby and aimed it at his own head. That last bullet would save him from torture by Apaches.

A heavy foot cut through the air, then. The gun flew from McGehee's hand, exploding harmlessly a few feet away. Sitting dazedly on the ground, the boy saw the flash of a boot—something that Apaches never wore. He jumped to his feet and looked into the face of a tall, rugged man of his own kind. When his eyes turned in the opposite direction, he saw other white men rounding up sullen Apaches at gun point.

A New Recruit

"Thank you, suh—" he began, then stopped as recognition dawned as to the tall man's identity.

"Major Burleson!" he exclaimed. Major Ed Burleson, commander of the Texas Rangers, was an old neighbor. "You and your men sure did me a big favor!"

The Ranger tipped three fingers to his hat in an offhand salute. "Howdy, Charley," he said pleasantly. "You did us a favor by flushing 'em out. We were hot on their trail when we heard the shooting. Looks like we didn't get here a minute too soon."

Major Burleson's face became grave. "You know, son," he said softly, "we had orders to round up a hundred and twenty-five stray Apaches—and one stray kid, name of Charley McGehee, who left the plow standing in the cornpatch three years ago. Sure riled his dad, who hasn't seen him since."

McGehee grinned at the famous Ranger. "I've missed Dad and Ma, but sure haven't missed the corn patch. But I just wasn't figuring on being rounded up by the Rangers. Sorta felt I'd join up with 'em."

Major Burleson shook his head. "I wish I could take you in, son—'specially after what you did this morning. But the law says you're too young to draw Ranger pay. Enlistment age is eighteen."

"Oh, dang the pay!" the boy answered impatiently. "Not even asking that you issue me a horse and gun, because I've got my own. I'm just wanting to see some Frontier service, that's all."

Major Burleson's eyes met the alert eyes of the boy's. "All right, son," he said finally. "I'm not keeping anybody with the Ranger spirit out of the Rangers. Now, give the guard detail a hand with those Apaches!"

"*Yes, sir!*" responded the new recruit.

Salvo of Hate

So began the career of one of the youngest men ever to take the solemn oath of the Texas Rangers. That grim year of 1854 would prove young Charles L. McGehee to be one of the bravest figures who ever sat a Ranger saddle.

Major Burleson saw that he got his few dollars pay a month out of a special fund. Then he detailed Ranger Charley to the crack outfit of Lieutenant Hy Smith, guarding the West Texas frontier county of Gillespie. Between Fredericksburg, the county seat, and El Paso, on the Texas-Mexican border, lay six hundred miles of sand and cactus infested by savage outlaws and savage Indians.

Fredericksburg, settled by quiet, peaceful Germans fleeing from oppression in their own country, suffered from the attacks of both. Rustlers and renegades considered it rare sport to "shoot up the Dutch." Comanches and Apaches found the Germans a natural prey, because the latter were handier with hoes than with shotguns.

The law-abiding element among the Anglo-Saxon Texans was largely unfriendly to the Germans because these newcomers were bitter opponents of slavery in a state where Negroes were held as bondsmen. Even the Rangers stationed at Fredericksburg shared that prejudice and mingled little with the townspeople.

But from the minute he hit town, Ranger Charley refused to condemn the Germans because they spoke a different language and held different opinions from the majority.

"My father had a big plantation with lots of slaves in Alabama where I was born," he told his comrades around the campfire. "But we didn't come here to censor Germans. We came to protect Texans."

The youngest member of the outfit hadn't been in Fredericksburg long before duty demanded that he protect those Texans with the strange ways and strange tongue. It was Easter Eve. The Rangers, tired from months of fighting Comanches, were grumbling in their camp over having to spend the holiday among an alien folk. "Easter dinner—reckon it'll be beans and sowbelly like every other day," a man spat disgustedly. "But look at the Dutch!"

Ranger Charlie turned his head toward the town. On every one of the mountains around Fredericksburg burned the traditional Easter fires, that are still lighted to this day. From houses in the village came the sounds of accordion and flute, the pop of wine bottles being opened, the high-pitched refrain of traditional German folk songs.

The young Ranger was the first to hear another noise. It was the sound of guns banging on the outskirts of town, followed by the growing echo of galloping hoofs. Music stopped suddenly and women began screaming. Guns were roaring a salvo of hate against the good folk of Fredericksburg. Guns of lesser caliber and punier aim were answering from the houses.

Attack on Fredericksburg

Ranger Charley was first in his saddle. His comrades sprang to their stirrups. Five minutes later they were thundering into the main street of the little town. They rode headlong toward the band of desperadoes firing into the trim windows of the German homes. The invaders smelled of raw stump liquor as well as gunpowder. Ranger Charley recognized the evil figure riding at their head—a Frontier ruffian named Sack Johnson.

"Howdy, neighbors!" the outlaw yelled when he saw the Rangers. "You're Texas boys, too. Help us blast the Dutch!"

His answer was the bullet that spat from Charley McGehee's rifle. Blood spurted from Sack Johnson's arm. His gun dropped and went off on the neat cobblestones of the first street to be paved in Texas.

"Surrender, you hellhounds!" yelled Lieutenant Smith.

The outlaws answered with a fusillade. A shot nicked a button from McGehee's jacket. A Ranger horse fell dead, but its owner quickly jumped and began firing from the plank sidewalk.

Rangers and outlaws were locked now in hand-to-hand combat. The wounded Johnson slumped dead from his pony during the battle. Ranger Charley grappled from his saddle with a mean hombre who drew a bowie knife. The mounts of both reared high in the air. McGehee drew his side pistol and fired at the exposed head of his antagonist. The bullet tore a long, jagged seam across the forehead of the desperado, then swerved down to shatter the bowie knife.

"Stop shootin'!" an outlaw howled. "We've had enough!"

Six fallen badmen were bound with Ranger ropes, ready for the town calaboose, when the German settlers started pouring from their houses. At the head of the procession marched their venerable pastor. They stopped when they reached the Rangers.

Unforgettable Easter Dinner

The German parson peered through his thick spectacles at the men who had saved the lives and homes of his people.

"Thank you, thank you, Herr Rangers!" he said. "We have been poor hosts to gallant friends. Tomorrow, your company will attend our services. Then each of you shall eat the Feast of Easter with one of us."

Bright and early Sunday morning the Rangers, boots shined and hair clipped, sat in the town church with the colonists. Out of deference to the visitors, the parson preached in halting English. And his text came from the words of St. Paul: "Of one blood hath He created the nations of the earth."

Ranger Charley's host for Easter dinner was a wise, kindly German who'd been a count in the old country. The young lawman knew that the old man had renounced his title to fight for freedom in the great German revolution of 1848. After his guest had downed six helpings of everything, the ex-count took him to see his fields.

Charley McGehee saw something he'd never seen during his tiresome years of farming. He saw water flowing from the nearby Pedernales River down the neatly-plowed furrows of the colonist's land.

"Irrigation," the ex-count said briefly. "The time will come when Texas will know how to conserve its water for the biggest crops ever seen in America."

Standing there, Ranger Charley realized that this new way of watering crops would make farming a whole lot more pleasant and profitable for men like himself. During his remaining months in Fredericksburg, he had the one-time nobleman teach him every principle of what would today be called scientific agriculture.

Plow—or Gun?

On a furlough home, the boy just turned eighteen met an industrious, pretty girl named Sarah Humphreys. Money he'd carefully saved from his slim pay went to buy her a ring. He was anxious to marry and settle down with Sarah, and start a farm that would be a model for Texans of every race.

But Texas needed him at the end of a gun and not at the end of a plow. Before his leave expired, he was summoned to Austin, the capital. There he was greeted by Governor Elisha M. Pease.

"More work for you, McGehee," the Governor said. "Your old friends, the Lipan Apaches, are kicking up west of San Antonio." The Governor grinned. "Ranger Captain Jim Callahan has asked that I send you to his camp. Thinks the Lipans will be mighty glad to see you again."

Ranger Charley saluted the commander in chief of all Texas fighting men. Five minutes later, he was galloping toward Bandera Pass, a hundred miles from Austin and the site of Captain Callahan's camp.

Callahan's command greeted him with loud cheers when he rode in. On September 4, 1855, the company headed west to intercept a ravaging Apache band that had crossed over from Mexico at the Texas border town of Eagle Pass. The Texans reached Eagle Pass on October 2, then moved toward the village of San Fernando, held jointly by the Apaches and an allied band of Mexicans.

The Lipan warriors recognized Ranger Charley as soon as the Texans neared the outskirts of the town.

"Ho, caballero!" a red sentry shouted in Spanish. "We meet again to settle an old score! This time, senor, *your* life—"

The sentry raised his rifle and his hand touched the trigger. The gun fired as the Apache dropped dead. In a split-second, Ranger Charley's rifle had spoken first with a bullet through the heart.

Then the Rangers were in the town, fighting the invaders block by block down the village street. A swinging sign over a cantina crashed in splinters. Ranger Charley led an attack detail that charged into the saloon after a mixed force of Mexicans and Indians using the place as a fortress.

Two Texans were mortally wounded. Two more had sustained slighter injuries when McGehee's swinging boot kicked down the saloon door. The enemy fighters knelt under the bar, with their rifles protruding upward, as the Rangers swarmed into the place. "Over the bar and at 'em!" yelled Charley McGehee.

Under a withering blast of fire, the Rangers hurdled the bar. Charlie grabbed at the throat of a Lipan war chief. The struggling hands of the Indian disengaged a huge hunting knife, and the Texan felt a searing pain in his arm as the blade ripped through his flesh. Then a bullet from another Ranger gun smashed the chief's skull.

His one arm out of commission, Ranger Charley raised his rifle with the other. One shot of his went wild and punctured a bottle of tequila. A second finished a noted Mexican outlaw who had stirred the Lipans to undertake this campaign of blood and loot.

But now, all of the invaders holed up in the saloon were dead. Outside, the firing was dying down. Ranger Charlie marched out his comrades, to find the war party in full retreat across the Rio Grande River into Mexico.

Seven brave Rangers lay dead, fourteen were wounded in that memorable battle. As the company surgeon came forward to bind his bleeding arm, something told Charley McGehee that Lipan Apaches would henceforth be good Apaches.

Retires From the Rangers

He was right. After that crushing defeat, the Lipans became staunch friends and allies of the Texans in the bitter warfare against the Comanches. Lipan Chief Flacco was often an honored guest of Charley McGehee after the latter retired from the Rangers to marry Sarah Humphreys and start his big irrigated farm near San Marcos.

In the years ahead, McGehee became one of the major farmers of Texas. Remembering what he had learned from his German friends in Fredericksburg, he worked out many uses of waterpower for agriculture. His great estate, fronting for a mile and a half along the San Marcos River, became one of the showplaces of the Lone Star State.

Charley and Sarah were the parents of five fine sons. Both lived to an honored old age. And Ranger Charley is remembered equally for his deeds in peace and his deeds in war.

Read How Morris Lasker, Dry Goods Clerk, Became the Nemesis of Comanches and Bandits—in THE EMPIRE DREAMER, Another True Story of a Famous Texas Ranger by HAROLD PREECE, Coming Next Month!

Guns thundered and the walls echoed their thunder

Shandy Takes the Hook

By JIM MAYO

Tinhorn Kotch thought cleaning Shandy would be like taking milk from a kitten, but it resembled sorting wildcats in a sandstorm!

FOR three days Shandy Gamble had been lying on his back in the Perigord House awaiting the stranger in the black mustache. Nichols, his name was, and if they were ever going to start cattle buying they had better be moving. The season was already late.

Shandy Gamble was seventeen years old and tall for his age. In fact, he was tall for any age. Four inches over six feet, he was all feet, hands and shoulders With his shirt off you could count every rib in his lean body.

Perigord was the biggest town Shandy had ever seen. In fact, it was only the third town he had seen in his life. With the cattle buyers in town there was most a thousand head of folks, and on the street

Shandy felt uncomfortable and mighty crowded. Most of his time he spent down at the horse corrals or lying on his bed waiting for Nichols.

He had come to town to buy himself a new saddle and bridle. Maybe a new hat and shirt. He was a saving man, Shandy Gamble was, despite his youth. Now he not only was holding his own money but five hundred dollars belonging to Nichols. Had it not been for that he wouldn't have waited, for by now he was homesick for the KT outfit.

Nichols was a big, powerful man with a smooth shaved face and black, prominent eyes. He also had black hair and a black mustache. Shandy had been leaning on the corral gate when Nichols approached him. "Good afternoon, sir!" Nichols thrust out a huge hand. "I understand you're a cattleman?"

Shandy Gamble blinked. Nobody had ever called him a cattleman before and his chest swelled appreciably. He was a forty dollar a month cowhand, although at the moment he did have five hundred and fifty-two dollars in his pocket.

Fifty-two dollars was saved from his wages, and the five hundred was half the reward money for nailing two horse thieves back in the cedar country. Shandy had tracked them back there for Deputy Sheriff Holloway, and then when they killed Holloway he got mad and went in after them. He brought one out dead and one so badly mauled he wished he was dead. There was a thousand dollars on their heads and Shandy tried to give it to Mrs. Holloway, but she would accept only half.

Shandy shifted uneasily on the bed. It was time Nichols got back. The proposition had sounded good, no question about that. "You can't beat it, Gamble," Nichols had said, "you know cattle and I've the connections in Kansas City and Chicago. We can ride over the country buying cattle, then ship and sell them. A nice profit for both of us."

"That would take money, and I ain't got much," Shandy had said.

Nichols eyed him thoughtfully. No use telling the boy he had seen that roll when Shandy paid for his room in advance. "It won't take much to start," Nichols scowled as he considered the size of Shandy's roll, "say a thousand dollars."

"Shucks," Shandy was regretful. "I ain't got but five hundred."

"Fine!" Nichols clapped him on the shoulder. "We're partners then! You put up five hundred and I'll put up five hundred! We'll bank that here, and then start buying. I've got unlimited credit east of here, and when the thousand is gone, we'll draw on that. At this stage you'll be the one doing most of the thinking, so you won't need to put as much cash into it as I do."

"Well—" Shandy was not sure. It sounded like a good deal, and who knew cows better than he did? He had been practically raised with cows. "Maybe it would be a good deal. Old Ed France has a herd nobody's looked at, nice, fat stock, too."

"Good!" Nichols clapped him on the shoulder again. From his pocket he took a long brown envelope and a sheaf of bills. Very carefully he counted off five hundred dollars and stuck it into the envelope. "Now your five hundred."

Shandy dug down and hauled out his bills and counted off the five hundred dollars and tucked it into the envelope. "Now," Nichols started to put the envelope in his pocket, "we'll go to the bank, and—"

He stopped, then withdrew the envelope. "No, you just keep this on you. We'll bank it later."

Shandy Gamble accepted the fat envelope and stuck it into his shirt. Nichols glanced at his watch then rubbed his jaw. "Tell you what," Nichols said, "I've got to catch the stage for Holbrook. I'll be back tomorrow night. You stick around and don't let this money out of your hands, whatever you do. I'll see you at the hotel."

Shandy watched him go, shrugged, and went back to watching the horses. There was a fine black gelding there. Now if he was a cattle buyer, he would own that gelding, buy the new saddle and bridle, and some fancy clothes like Jim Finnegan wore, and would he show that outfit back on the KT!

The wait had dampened his enthusiasm. Truth was, he liked the KT and liked working with the boys. They were a good outfit. He rolled over on the bed and swung his feet to the floor. Reaching for his boots he shoved his big feet into them

and stood up.

To blazes with it! He'd open the envelope, leave the money in the bank for Nichols, and go back to the outfit. He was no cattle buyer, anyway. He was a cowhand.

Taking out the brown envelope, he ripped it open. Slowly he turned cold and empty inside, and stood there, his jaw slack, his shock of corn silk hair hanging over his face. The envelope was stuffed with old newspapers.

THE spring grass faded from green to brown and dust gathered in the trails. Waterholes shrank and the dried earth cracked around them and the cattle grew gaunt. It was a hard year on the caprock, and that meant work for the hands.

Shandy Gamble was in the saddle eighteen to twenty hours most days, rounding up strays and pushing them south to the gullies and remaining waterholes. When he had returned without his saddle there was a lot of jawing about it, and the boys all poked fun at Shandy, but he grinned widely and took it, letting them believe he had drunk it up or spent it on women.

Jim Finnegan rode out one day on a gray horse. He was looking the situation over and making estimates on the beef to be had after the fall roundup. Shandy was drifting south with three head of gaunted stock when they met. Gamble drew up and Finnegan joined him. "Howdy, Son! Stock looks poor."

"Yeah," Shandy dug for the makings, "we need rain plumb bad." He rolled his smoke, then asked quietly, "You ever hear of a buyer name of Nichols? Big, black eyed man?"

Shandy's description was accurate and painstaking, the sort of description a man might give who was used to reading sign and who thirty seconds after a glimpse of a horse or cow could describe its every hair and ailment.

"Nichols? You've forgotten the name, Son. No, the hombre you describe is Abel Kotch. He's a card slick an' confidence man. Brute of a fighter, too. Brags he never saw the man could stand up to him in a fist fight."

"Seen him around?"

"Yeah, he was around Fort Worth earlier this year. He rousts around with the June boys."

The June boys. There were five of the Junes—the old man, Pete June, and the four outlaw sons, Alec, Tom, Buck and Windy. All were gunslicks, badmen, dirty, unkempt drifters, known to be killers, believed to be horse and cow thieves, and suspected of some out and out murders.

Two nights later, back at the bunkhouse, Johnny Smith rode in with the mail, riding down from Tuckup way where he had stopped to ask after some iron work being done for the ranch by the Tuckup blacksmith. Tuckup was mostly an outlaw town, but the blacksmith there was the best around. Cowhands do most of their own work, but the man at Tuckup could make anything with iron and the KT boss had been getting some fancy andirons for his fireplace.

"Killin' over to Tuckup," Johnny said, as he swung down. "That Sullivan from Brady Canyon tangled with Windy June. Windy bored him plenty."

Shandy Gamble's head came up. "June? The rest of that outfit there?"

"Sure, the whole shootin' match o' Junes!"

"Big, black eyed fellow with em? Black mustache?"

"Kotch? Sure as you know he is. He whupped the blacksmith. Beat him so bad he couldn't finish the old man's andirons. That's a rough outfit."

The boss of the KT was talking to Jim Finnegan when Shandy strolled up. "Boss, anything you want done over Tuckup way? I got to ride over there."

The Boss glanced at him sharply. It was unlike Gamble to ask permission to be away from his work. He was a good hand, and worked like two men. If he wanted to go to Tuckup there was a reason.

"Yeah. Ask about my irons. Too, you might have a look up around the water pocket. We're missin' some cows. If you find them, or see any suspicious tracks, come ahootin' an' we'll ride up that way."

SHANDY Gamble was astride a buckskin that belonged to the KT. He was a short coupled horse with a wide head, good at cutting or roping, but a good trail horse, too. Johnny Smith, who was mending a bridle, glanced up in time to see Gamble going out of the door with

his rifle in his hand. That was not too unusual, with plenty of wolves and lions around, but Shandy was wearing two guns, something that hadn't happened for a long time. Johnny's brow puckered, then he shrugged and went back to work on the bridle.

The Tuckup Trail was a scar across the face of the desert. It was a gash in the plateau, and everywhere was rock, red rock, pink rock, white, yellow and buff rock, twisted and gnarled into weird shapes. By night it was a ghost land where a wide moon floated over the blasted remains of ancient mountains and by day it was an oven blazing with heat and dancing with dust devils and heat waved distance.

Tuckup was a cluster of shabby down at heel buildings tucked back into a hollow among the rocks. It boasted that there was a grave in boothill for every living person in town, and they always had two empty graves waiting to receive the next customers.

Tuckup was high, and despite the blazing heat of the day, a fire was usually welcome at night. The King High Saloon was the town's resort, meeting place and hangout. Second only to it was the stable, a rambling, gloomy building full of stalls for sixty horses and a loft full of hay.

SHANDY GAMBLE stabled his horse and gave it a good rubdown. It had a hard ride ahead of it for he knew that there would be no remaining in town after he had done what he had to do.

Lean, gangling, and slightly stooped, he stood in the stable door and rolled a smoke. His shoulders seemed excessively broad above the narrow hips, and the two .44's hung with their butts wide and easy to his big hands. He wore jeans and a faded checked shirt. His hat was gray, dusty and battered. There was a hole through the crown that one of the horse thieves had put there.

There was the saloon, a general store, the blacksmith shop and livery stable. Beyond and around was a scattering of a dozen or so of houses, mostly mere shacks. Then there were two bunkhouses that called themselves hotels.

Shandy Gamble walked slowly across to the blacksmith shop. The smith was a burly man and when he looked up, Shandy saw a deep half healed cut on his cheek bone and an eye still swollen and dark. "KT irons ready?" Shandy asked, to identify himself.

"Will be." The smith stared at him. "Rider from there just here yestiddy. Your boss must be in a mighty hurry."

"Ain't that. I had some business over here. Know an hombre name of Kotch?"

The smith glared. "You bein' funny?"

"No. I got business with him."

"Trouble?"

"Uh-huh. I'm goin' to beat his head in."

The smith shrugged. "Try it if you want. I done tried but not no more. He durned near kilt me."

"He won't kill me."

"Your funeral. He's up at the King High." The smith looked at him. "You be keerful. Them Junes is up there, too." He wiped his mustache. "KT, you better think again. You're only a kid."

"My feet make as big tracks as his'n."

"Goin' in, they may. Comin' out they may be a sight smaller."

Shandy Gamble's eyes were chill. "Like you said, it's my funeral."

He hitched his guns in place and started across the street. He was almost to the hitch-rail in front of the King High when he saw a fresh hide hung over the fence. It was still bloody. Curiously, he walked back. The brand had been cut away from the rest of the hide. Poking around in a pile of refuse ready for burning, he found it, scraped it clean and tucked it into his pocket. He was turning when he looked up to see a man standing near him.

He was several inches shorter than Shandy, but he was wide and blocky. He wore his gun tied down and he looked mean. His cheeks were hollow and his eyes small. "What you doin', pokin' around hyar?"

"Just lookin'." Shandy straightened to his full height. "Sort of proddin' around."

"Whar you from?"

"Ridin' for the KT."

The man's lips tightened. "Git out of hyar!"

"Don't aim to be in no hurry."

"You know who I am? I'm Tom June, an' when I say travel, I mean it!"

Shandy stood looking at him, his eyes mild. "Well, now. Tom June, I've heard o' you. Heard you was a cow thief an' a rustler."

"Why, you—!" His hand swept for his gun, but Shandy had no idea to start a shooting now. His long left slammed out, his fist balled and rock hard. It caught Tom June flush on the mouth as his hand swept back for his gun and his head came forward. At the same time, Shandy's right swung into the pit of the man's stomach and his left dropped to the gun wrist.

The struggle was brief, desperate, and final. Shandy clubbed a big fist to the man's temple and he folded. Hurriedly, Shandy dragged him into a shed, disarmed and tied him. The last job he did well. Then he straightened and walked back to the street.

A quick glance up and down, and then he went up the steps to the porch in front of the King High Saloon, and through the batwing doors.

FIVE men sat around a poker game. Shandy recognized the broad back instantly as that of Nichols, who he now knew was Abel Kotch. At least two of the others were Junes, as he could tell from their faces.

Shoving his hat back on his head he stood behind Kotch and glanced down at his cards. Kotch had a good hand. The stack of money before him would come to at least two hundred dollars.

"Bet 'em," Shandy said.

Kotch stirred irritably in his chair. "Shut up!" he said harshly.

Shandy's gun was in his hand, the muzzle against Kotch's ear. "Bet 'em," I said, "bet 'em strong."

Kotch's hands froze. The Junes looked up, staring at the gangling, towheaded youth. "Beat it, kid!" he said sharply.

"You stay out of this, June!" Shandy Gamble's voice was even. "My argyment's with this coyote. I'd as soon blow his head off as not, but if'n he does what he's told the worst he'll get is a beatin'!"

Kotch shoved chips into the center of the table. The Junes looked at their cards and raised. Kotch bet them higher. He won. Carefully, he raked in the coin.

"This is Shandy Gamble, Kotch. You owe me five hundred. Count it out before I forget myself an' shoot you, anyway."

"There ain't five hundred here!" Kotch protested.

"There's bettern' four. Count it!"

"Well, what do you know, Windy?" The thin man grinned across the table. "Ole Kotch run into the wrong hombre for once! Wished Buck was here to see this!"

Reluctantly, Kotch counted the money. It came to four hundred and ten dollars. Coolly, Shandy Gamble pocketed the money. "All right," he said, "stand up mighty careful an' unload your pockets."

"What?" Kotch's face was red with fury. "I'll kill you for this!"

"Empty 'em. I want more money. I want a hundred an' twenty dollars more."

"You ain't got it comin'!" Kotch glared at him.

"Five hundred an' interest for one year at six per cent. You get it for me or I'll be forced to take your hose an' saddle."

"Why, you—!"

The gun lifted slightly and Abel Kotch shut up. His eyes searched the boy's face and what he read there wasn't pleasant. Kotch decided suddenly that this youngster would shoot, and shoot fast.

Carefully, he opened a money belt and counted out the hundred and twenty dollars which Gamble quietly stowed in his pockets. Then he holstered his gun and hitched the belts into place. "Now, just for luck, Mr. Cattle Buyer, I'm goin' to give you a lickin'!"

Kotch stared. "Why, you fool! You—!" He saw the fist coming and charged, his weight slamming Shandy back against the wall, almost knocking the wind from him. Kotch jerked a knee up to Gamble's groin, but the boy had grown up in cow camps and cattle towns, cutting his fighting teeth on the bone-hard, rawhide-tough teamsters of the freight outfits. Gamble twisted and threw Kotch off balance, then hit him with a looping right that staggered the heavier man.

Kotch was no flash in the pan. He could fight and he knew it. He set himself, feinted, and then threw a hard right that caught the boy flush on the chin. Shandy staggered, but recovered as Kotch rushed and dropping his head, butted the heavier man under the chin. Kotch staggered, swinging both hands; and straightening, Shandy walked into him slugging.

They stood there wide legged and slugged like madmen, their ponderous blows slamming and battering at head and body. Shandy's head sang with the power of those punches and his breath came in gasps, but he was lean and hard from

years of work on the range, and he fell into a rhythm of punching. His huge fists smashed at the gambler like battering rams.

Kotch was triumphant, then determined, then doubtful. His punches seemed to be soaked up by the boy's abundant vitality, while every time one of those big fists landed it jarred him to the toes. Suddenly he gave ground and swung a boot toe for Shandy's groin. .

Turning, Gamble caught it on his leg, high up, then grabbed the boot and jerked. Kotch's other foot lost the ground and he hit the floor hard. Gamble grabbed him by the shirt front and smashed him in the face, a free swing that flattened the bone in Kotch's nose. Then, jerking him erect, Shandy gripped him with his left hand and swung a looping blow to the wind. Kotch's knees buckled, and Shandy smashed him in the face again and again. Then he shoved him hard. Kotch staggered, brought up against the back wall and slid to a sitting position, his face bloody, his head loose on its neck.

Shandy Gamble drew back and hitched his belts into place again. He mopped his face with a handkerchief, while he got his breath back. There were five men in the room now, all enemies without doubt. Two of them were Junes—obviously from earlier conversation they were Windy and Alec.

Shandy hitched his gun belts again and left his thumbs tucked in them. He looked at Windy June. "Found a cowhide out back," he said, casually, "carried a KT brand."

Instantly, the room was still. Windy June was staring at him, his eyes ugly. Alec was standing with his right hand on the edge of the bar; the others spread suddenly, getting out of the way. This, then, was between himself and the Junes.

"What then?" Windy asked, low voiced.

"Your brother Tom didn't like it. I called him a rustler, and he didn't like that."

"You called Tom June a rustler?" Windy's voice was low with amazement. "And you're alive?"

"I took his gun away an' tied him up. I'm takin' him to the sheriff."

"You're takin —why, you fool kid!"

"I'm takin' him, an' as you Junes ride together, I reckon you an' Alec better come along, too."

Windy June was astonished. Never in his life had he been called like this, and here, in his own bailiwick, by a kid. But then he remembered the job this kid had done on Abel Kotch and his lips grew close and tight.

"You better git," he said, "while you're all in one piece!"

The bartender spoke. "Watch yourself, Windy. I know this kid. He's the one that brought the boys in from Cottonwood, one dead an' one almost."

Windy June smiled thinly. "Look, kid. We don't want to kill you. There's two of us. If you get by us, there's still Buck an' Pop. You ain't got a chance with me alone, let alone the rest of them."

Shandy Gamble stood tall in the middle of the floor. His long face was sober. "You better come along then, Windy, because I aim to take you in, dead or alive!"

Windy June's hand was a blur of spead. Guns thundered and the walls echoed their thunder. In the close confines of the saloon a man screamed. There was the acrid smell of gunpowder and Shandy Gamble weaving in the floor's middle, his guns stabbing flame. He fired, then moved forward. He saw Alec double over and sprawl across Windy's feet, his gun sliding across the floor.

Windy, like a weaving blade of steel, faced Shandy and fired. Gamble saw Windy June's body jerk with the slam of a .44, saw it jerk again and twist, saw him going to his knees with blood gushing from his mouth, his eyes bitterly, wickedly alive, and the guns in his big fists hammering their futile bullets into the floor. Then Shandy fired again, and Windy June sprawled across Alec and lay still. In the moment of silence that followed the cannonading of the guns, Windy's foot twitched and his spur jingled.

Shandy Gamble faced the room, his eyes searching the faces of the other men. "I don't want no trouble from you. Two of you load the bodies on their horses. I'm taking 'em with me, like I said."

Abel Kotch sat on the floor, his shocked and bloody face stunned with amazement at the bodies that lay there. He had taken milk from a kitten and had it turn to a raging mountain lion before his eyes. He sat very still. He was out of this. He

wanted to stay out. He was going to make no move that could be misinterpreted.

Slowly, they took the bodies out and tied them on the horses of the two June boys. Shandy watched them, then walked across to the stable to get his own horse, his eyes alert for the other Junes.

When he had the horses he walked back to the shed and saw Tom June staring up at him.

"What happened? I heard shootin'?"

"Yeah."

Shandy reached down and caught him by his jacket collar with his left hand and coolly dragged him out of the shed, his feet dragging. He took him to the front of the saloon and threw him bodily across his horse. The bound man saw the two bodies, dripping and bloody. He cried out, then began to swear, viciously and violently.

"Look out, kid."

Who spoke, he did not know, but Shandy Gamble glanced up and saw two other men who wore the brand of the June clan—Pop and Buck June, wide apart in the street. Their faces were set and ready.

Shandy Gamble stepped away from the horses into the street's center. "You can drop your guns an' come with me!" he called.

Neither man spoke. They came on, steadily and inexorably. And then something else happened. Up the street behind them appeared a cavalcade of riders, and Shandy recognized his boss, leading them. Beside him rode Johnny Smith and Jim Finnegan and behind them the riders from the KT.

"Drop 'em, June!" The boss's voice rang out sharp and clear. "There's nine of us here. No use to die!"

The Junes stopped. "No use, Buck," Pop June said, "the deck's stacked agin us."

THE BOSS rode on past and stopped. He stared at the dead Junes and the bound body of Tom. He looked at Shandy as if he had never seen him before.

"What got into you, Shandy?" he asked. "We'd never have known, but Johnny told us when you heard the Junes were here you got your guns and left. Then Jim remembered you'd been askin' him about this here Kotch, who trailed with 'em."

Shandy shrugged, building a smoke. "Nothin'. We'd had trouble, Kotch an' me." He drew the patch of hide from his pocket. "Then there was this, out back. Tom started a ruction when he seen me find it."

Shandy Gamble swung into his saddle. "I reckon the Junes'll talk, an' they'll tell you where the cows are. An' boss," Shandy puckered his brow, "could I ride into Perigord? I want to git me a new saddle."

"You got the money?" The Boss reached for his pocket.

"Yeah," Shandy smiled, "I got it from Kotch. He'd been holdin' it for me."

"Holdin' it for him!" Finnegan exploded. "He trusted Kotch—with money?"

Kotch had come to the door and was staring out at them. The Boss chuckled. "Well, trust or not, looks like he collected!"

Next Month's Headliners

GOLDEN GUNS

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

LONG SAM MOOCHES A MEAL

An Outlaw Littlejohn Story by LEE BOND

THE EMPIRE DREAMER

A True Texas Ranger Story by HAROLD PREECE

AND MANY OTHER STORIES!

HANG ONE, BURY TWO

Pete Harrison isn't ready to have his neck stretched—at least not until he has paid off the treacherous enemy who framed him!

by

LEE BOND

THE gunshots were so surprising, Pete Harrison leaped out of bed and fell over a chair before he got his eyes open. Not that opening his eyes helped Pete much. His bedroom was so pitch-black he could barely see the lighter squares that marked the windows. The gun that had awakened Pete was somewhere about the front of his ranch house, still hammering out swift shots.

"Stop that shootin'!" Pete yelled angrily.

He found his six-shooter and belt among the clothing he had spilled when he upset the chair. Pete cinched the belt

Harrison started along the road with the horses at a lope

about his underwear-clad middle and rushed from the bedroom. The shooting stopped as he got into the living room, yet Pete was aware of a scuffling sound out near his front porch.

"You, out there!" Pete called. "What's goin' on?"

He heard the tinkle of a spur and the thud of a boot heel, only the sound came from the west side of the house now. Pete drew his six-gun, moving more swiftly towards the front door. Just as he stepped to the porch, he heard a sound out towards his corral that told him the tall gate was being opened. Pete ran to the end of the porch and started to yell at the intruder, but changed his mind when he heard his horses being chased out of the corral.

"Ed Coe and some more of Kirk Jarboe's Rail Riders tryin' to throw a scare into me, I'll bet!" Pete growled. "But if they think they'll turn my saddle stock out and scatter it—"

Pete did not get to finish. A gun winked out in the night like an overgrown firefly. The gun that roared was south, down along the lane, not out towards the corrals. And the bullet that gun threw came across Pete's right thigh like the quick swipe of a red-hot running iron. He yowled, threw his six-shooter no telling where into the yard, and jumped backwards so violently he fell sprawling.

"Hey, cut it out!" he bawled.

The answer was what Pete thought to be about a washtub full of bullets that came squalling up from the lane to hammer the adobe wall of his ranchhouse. Pete rolled over on his face and went towards the front door like a gaunt lizard.

"Gosh sakes'" he gulped as he tumbled inside the house.

PETE got up when he was off-side from the open door.

He shivered a little when bullets came in through windows and the door, to pop and rattle around the room.

"Dad-blamed pack of two-legged varmints!" he growled, suddenly angry. "So they want a gun-ruckus, do they?"

Pete was easing along the inside wall towards the door as he muttered. But he did not show himself in the portal. He reached up, feeling for the .44-40 Winchester repeater he kept on deer antlers above the door. Only the rifle was not there. Pete blinked into the darkness. He had gone, that day, far to the rimrock country at the head of his Aliso Canyon range. He had stood there in this room, looking up at the rifle, wondering whether or not to pack it along on his saddle. He had finally decided against taking the gun, and had walked out of the ranchhouse without touching it.

"Fine picklement I'm in!" he griped. "When that bushwhack bullet skittered across my leg, I up and throwed my forty-four six-pistol plumb away. Now my rifle turns up missin', and me with a pack of killers on my neck."

Pete went to his bedroom, located the tangle of clothing beside the overturned chair, and dressed. He had a 12-gauge breech loader around the house some place that he used occasionally to kill himsef a mess of quail or white-winged doves. It had been some time since he had used the gun, however, and he could not remember, offhand, just where he had last seen it.

"The way a bachelor scatters his stuff around, it's a wonder he can even find his hat when he wants to go out doors," Pete grumbled. "Maybe the blamed scatter-gun is in the pantry, back of the kitchen stove."

Pete hurried to the kitchen, tip-toeing uneasily. Even the occasional shots had stopped now, and he had a feeling that his attackers were in close. He glanced warily at the kitchen's open back door, then started on past to the pantry behind the stove. Pete thought his wiry red hair stuck straight up when a huge, black shape sprang up and forward at him through that open back door. He felt a startled yell vibrate his own throat, and believed he heard the hurtling man warn

him to get his hands up. Then it seemed to Pete that some kind of explosives went off inside his skull, and he felt his shoulders slap the kitchen floor.

"All right, men!" a deep voice boomed. "I nabbed the peckerwood."

Pete guessed hazily that whatever had hit him on the noggin must have scrambled his brains. That voice sure sounded like the voice of big Joe Streeter. Only Pete told himself that he was mistaken about that. Joe Streeter was the sheriff, and sure would not be out helping a pack of bushwhackers do their dirty-best to kill an honest man. Yet when Pete finally regained his wits to blink up into bright lamplight, the first person he saw was Sheriff Joe Streeter.

"My gosh, Joe!" Pete gulped, and sat up.

He discovered that he was in the middle of his own living room, ringed in by grim eyed, tight-lipped men. They were Agua Mala merchants, cowhands from the surrounding ranges, and miners from the diggings back in the Yellow Horse Hills. Pete had become acquainted with most of them in the three years since he had come here, bought this old, long abandoned ranch, and started building it up.

"Since when did the sheriff of this county and a bunch of decent citizens turn their hands to bushwhackin'?" Pete asked slowly.

"Look who's talkin' about bushwhackin'!" a brittle voice ripped out.

AT THE sound of the voice, Pete swung his head sharply, eyes narrowing as he looked at slim, handsome young Kirk Jarboe of the vast Rail J. Jarboe was over against the front wall, white teeth flashing as he grinned. He jiggled an ornate six-shooter in one hand, dark eyes mocking as he met Pete's wintry stare. Pete started to get up, but the big sheriff reached down, shoved his shoulder hard.

"Still sore under the collar because I kicked you off the Rail J, almost a year ago, for annoyin' my charmin' cousin, Nora, I see, Harrison!" Kirk Jarboe laughed thinly. "Well, if the law doesn't rush its work too much, Nora and I will fetch you a piece of our wedding cake to eat before you're hanged."

"You're Nora Jarboe's own blood-kin second cousin, Kirk!" Pete snorted. "You'd marry her to get your fingers on the ranch and livestock and money her daddy, old Avery Jarboe, left her at his death, two years ago. But even if your cheap lady-killer mewin' around Nora didn't keep the girl sick of the sight of you, she's still too intelligent to marry any of her own kinfolks."

Kirk Jarboe stepped away from the wall, handsome face beet-red. His dark eyes were narrow and hot looking as he suddenly gripped and raised the fancy six-shooter.

"All right, now!" Sheriff Joe Streeter said hastily. "Kirk, you leave me handle this peckerwood."

"Joe, was it you who crept in the back door and warped somethin'—your gun likely—over my head?" Pete droned.

"You can thank your stars that I didn't blow you in two!" the sheriff retorted.

"I've been wonderin' about that," Pete declared. "You and these other galoots tried hard enough to murder me. How come you got soft-hearted when you caught me flat-footed, with no weapon in hand?"

"What did you think me and my posse would do when you started shootin' at us as we come up the lane?" the sheriff gritted.

"Stop talkin' through your hat!" Pete said. "I never fired a shot at you and these men. One of you blistered my hip with a bullet, and I just up and throwed my six-shooter away, I was so surprised. Find that forty-four Colt of mine, and you'll see it ain't been fired for a month of Sundays."

"We found your six-shooter, and I noticed that it ain't been shot recent." The sheriff shrugged. "But that forty-four-forty rifle which we found out on your front steps tells a different story."

"Wait a minute!" Pete yelped.

Speaking rapidly because of an increasing uneasiness, Pete explained how the sound of a gun firing at the front of his house had awakened him. He told of hearing someone pass the west wall of the living room, and of having gone to the porch and hearing his corral gate being opened.

"About that time one of you galoots grazed me with a bullet," Pete finished. "I crawled inside, and don't mind admittin' that I was plenty sore when I reached up to them deer horns, yonder over the door, for the rifle I know was there when I left, early this mornin'. Only the Winchester wasn't up there."

"Willard Foster won't have any trouble gettin' a noose around your freckled neck if you stick to lies like that, Harrison!" Kirk Jarboe said loudly.

"Better keep your nose out of this, wharf rat!" Pete said sharply.

Kirk Jarboe made a sound that jerked all eyes to him. His handsome, thin face turned bone-white, and there was a wild look in his widening dark eyes as he stared at Pete Harrison.

"Wharf rat?" he echoed. "That's an odd name to be used out here in the Arizona badlands, Harrison."

"Ten years ago, Kirk, you were nothin' but a third-rate yegg, pick-pocket and footpad, skulkin' around the New Orleans waterfront," Pete said bluntly. "You had a police record a mile long, even if you were only nineteen or twenty years old. Avery Jarboe heard about you, and went south and got you. The old fellow saw to it that you had every chance to mend your ways and amount to somethin'. But you haven't changed any, Kirk. You ran through with the fortune old Avery Jarboe left you privately. Now you think you'll marry Nora and squander what her daddy left her."

KIRK JARBOE'S face got even whiter, and there was something more deadly than just anger in his burning eyes. He started forward, but stopped when a couple of grizzled possemen blocked his way.

"One of the boys came out to the ranch from town and told me what had happened, and that Joe was comin' here with a posse to pick you up," Jarboe said harshly. "I saddled a horse and rode over, not aimin' to butt in at all. But if you had a gun on you, I'd make you eat the lies you've just told about me, Harrison!"

"All anybody present has to do to find out whether or not I've lied about you bein' a crook, with many arrests booked against you, is write to the New Orleans police," Pete retorted.

"It's routine, Pete, but I'll have to tell you that you're under arrest, and that anything you say from now on will be used against you," the sheriff grunted.

"Arrest?" Pete gaped. "What for am I under arrest?"

"Murder!" the sheriff said coldly.

Pete leaped to his feet, eyes bulging out. His bony, long-nosed face turned so white the big freckles looked almost black in contrast.

"Murder?" he croaked finally.

"Late this afternoon, Ed Coe was found down by that cussed bob-wire fence you strung across this Aliso Canyon range," the burly sheriff said grimly. "Ed had been shot in the back of the head. Twenty-two steps from where he lay, I found a forty-four-forty cartridge and a smudge of boot prints in a thicket. Your rifle and six-shooter both shoot them forty-four-forty shells. Add to that the fact that you threatened, before winesses, to kill Ed Coe if he cut your fence, and I reckon you can see why you're under arrest."

Pete pulled in a slow breath, feeling cold chills play along his spine. He knew what the sheriff meant about threats made in public, and fought desperately to marshal his wits.

"I know what you're drivin' at, all right," Pete tried to sound unconcerned. "I was in Stub Pinkler's Eagle Bar at Agua Mala one day last week, havin' a beer with three or four fellers. Ed Coe walked in, put them gimlet eyes of his on me, and started snickerin' and makin'

loud remarks about that fence I put across the canyon up here, six months ago, sure needin' a lot of mendin'. Kirk Jarboe has gradually replaced the old Rail J hands with Coe and other toughs who have cut my fence a number of times. I knew Coe was braggin' about that when he started poppin' off. I got sore and told him I'd bullet-blister him or any other Rail J man I caught usin' nippers on that wire."

"It'll be up to a jury to decide whether your remarks amounted to a threat to kill or not," the sheriff said.

"Joe, for gosh sakes!" Pete groaned. "I was up on the rimrocks, clean at the north end of Aliso Canyon, all day. I got in an hour after dark, ate a cold snack, and went to bed."

"Pull in your horns, Harrison!" Kirk Jarboe put in sharply. "About thirty minutes before sunset this afternoon, I was over on the east side of Aliso Canyon, drivin' a bunch of young horses down from the roughs. I saw you ride off the ridge, strike your fence, and come west along it."

"Say, what's the idea in a lie like that?" Pete yelped, staring at the dandified Jarboe.

"The Luther brothers, Lon and Roy, were comin' down Aliso from their greasy-sack outfit back in the roughs," Kirk Jarboe grinned wickedly at Pete. "They hit that gate in your drift fence just at sundown, and were lettin' themselves through, aimin' to ride on to town, when they heard a shot. They followed the fence for several hundred yards, and found my foreman, Ed Coe, lyin' on the ground, his brains shot out. Your fence had been cut, and there was a pair of wire cutters on the ground beside Ed Coe's hand."

"Is this just some of Kirk's palaver, Joe, or is he tellin' the truth about the Luther boys findin' Coe's body?" Pete asked the sheriff.

"What Kirk has said is true." Streeter nodded. "But this ain't no time to go discussin' the case. Poke them hands out so's I can get these bracelets on you. I sent Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland to saddle a horse for you."

PETE'S lips suddenly thinned. Lanky, pale-eyed Tull Eldridge and squatty, bull-necked Sam Garland were two of the toughest men Kirk Jarboe had working on the Rail J. Pete wondered why the sheriff had allowed those two to come along as possemen and was about to ask the sheriff when another thought popped into his mind.

Joe Streeter had a pair of wickedly strong looking handcuffs out and was working at them now with a small key. Pete's heart came up and kicked at the roof of his mouth a time or two, then dropped back down to slam at his ribs. The thoughts of being cooped in a cramped little cell put a fear into Pete that made him start considering reckless things.

"I hear Tull and Sam comin' with the horse, Joe," Kirk Jarboe called out. "What's the matter with them bracelets?"

"Blamed things are stuck," the sheriff grunted.

"Not that I'm in any rush to get them on, but let's see the handcuffs, Joe," Pete said, and stepped towards the sheriff.

Pete knew Joe Streeter would never allow him to handle those handcuffs. As he stepped towards the officer, Pete circled a little, putting himself almost within arm's reach of the lamp. When he reached out and tried to get hold of the steel handcuffs, Streeter swore, bunted him with one big shoulder.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Pete yelled.

About everyone else in the room started yelling then. Pete seemed to have been thrown into a tumbling fall by the sheriff's thrusting shoulder. He half whirled, toppling over sidewise, long arms clawing at the small table that held the lamp. He got hold of the table and took it on down with him, grinning into the blackness that engulfed the room with the lamp's crashing.

"Watch out, men!" the sheriff bel-

lowed above the confusion.

Pete leaped to his feet, seized the spindle-legged, light weight table he had just upset, and sent it whirling into the dark room. He heard a sodden thump, then a man's voice lifted in a wild bleat.

There was a rush of feet towards the shouting man, then a splintering sound as someone fell over the table. That was followed by a batch of snarling and cussing and thrashing around that made Pete think of a dog fight.

"Quiet, you clabber-heads!" the sheriff was roaring.

Pete slid on along the wall to the door that led into the kitchen. He headed for the wood box, over beside the big stove. Gathering up an armload of stove wood, he stepped back to the doorway that led into the living room. A wicked grin spreading his wide lips, he began hurling the stout sticks of wood into the roaring room. Pete guessed his aim was middlin' good, for the faster the stove-wood flew the louder and wilder the sounds in the room became.

Pete flung the last stick of wood, then heeled around and streaked for the back door. He went out and along the east side of his house, halting to peer guardedly around the front corner. He saw a saddled horse standing temptingly near, but made no move towards the mount. On the porch were two dark figures, standing before the front door.

"Kirk!" one of the men Pete was watching yelled.

That voice belonged to lanky, mean-eyed Tull Edridge. Pete knew before he heard the other speak that he would be stocky, bull-necked Sam Garland.

"Kirk, what's goin' on in there?" Sam Garland's gruff voice asked now.

"Harrison knocked the lamp over, and is tryin' to get away!" Kirk Jarboe's voice came.

"Sounds to me like you're beatin' each other's brains out!" Tull Eldridge grunted. "Sam and me got Harrison's mount."

"Harrison's gate was open, and there wasn't a horse in the corral or barn," Sam Garland declared. "Tull and me hiked down to his hoss pasture and caught a mount for him."

"Listen to that brawl in there!" Tull Eldridge laughed.

QUIETLY Pete Harrison eased back from the corner, then turned and walked out to the lane. He moved south down that, beginning to trot when he heard horses stamping. He was among the horses the possemen had ridden out from town within a few moments, testing until he found a saddle with stirrups long enough to accommodate his lanky legs.

"A little thing like horse stealin' don't matter to a man already charged with murder!" he ruminated gloomily.

Pete stripped the gear from all except the horse he meant to borrow. He mounted, rounded up the horses he had freed of gear, and started them south along the road at a lope.

"It's gosh-awful late to go callin', but I want to find out what Nora thinks about this before I settle down to worryin' about my own hide." Pete opined aloud.

Pete swung east, across the range, making a bee-line for the huge Rail J ranchhouse. It was an hour past midnight when he sighted the place. He was more than a little surprised, therefore, to see that the big house was showing light at every window. He frowned over that, left his horse in a copse of timber well away from the beautifully kept grounds, and moved in on foot, glad that it was a moonless night. He was skirting the main corral when he saw the figure moving there at the tall gate.

Pete folded at the knees and hit the ground on his stomach, eyes straining. The figure at the gate had hold of a saddled horse's reins, and seemed to be having trouble with the sliding bar.

"Stick, darn you!" a voice said.

Pete let a pent-up breath gust out of him. That made the horse snort, and brought the person who had fussed at the sticky gate bar around mighty fast.

Pete got up, grinning all over his freckled face. That voice he had heard, sweet as an angel's harp to his ears, was Nora Jarboe's voice.

"Who are you, and why were you skulking around here?" Nora's voice rang out, sharp with uneasiness.

"A gent two jumps ahead of a noose generally sort of skulks around, Nora," Pete said drily.

"Pete!" she cried. "Oh, darling, I was just starting—"

Nora did not finish saying where she had been just starting. She was racing to Pete even as she talked, however, and that was enough to satisfy him. He caught her and held her close, and felt her hands trembling as she clung to his shoulders.

"Old Soapy Deal came in from town, Pete, and told me something terrible about Ed Coe," she said tensely. "Soapy is so plastered, darn him, that I've been all of an hour getting the full story. Did—did you know that Joe Streeter and a posse are out searching for you?"

"I don't run around without my hat, no six-shooter, and straddlin' a stolen horse, usually," Pete said gloomily.

And because he knew that there would be no keeping the details back, he told Nora everything, starting with the gun at his front porch awakening him and ending with an account of having chased the posse's mounts back towards town, minus their saddles.

"So I poked on over here, Nora, wantin' to see you before I tried to figger out anything," he finished gloomily. "After all, I did make some fool talk about blisterin' Ed Coe, or anybody else I caught cuttin' my fence, with gun lead. You don't think I'd up and pop Ed Coe in the back of the head with a bullet, do you?"

"Pete Harrison!" Nora shook his lank shoulders.

"Well, that's a load off my mind," Pete said. "Now maybe I can start tryin' to figger out some way to scotch Joe Streeter's little scheme for puttin' a hang-noose around my blamed neck."

"Joe is only doing his duty." Nora said uneasily. "Breaking away from him as you've done won't help your case one bit, either. Let's go to the house and have coffee and sandwiches while we try to think of something."

PETE shrugged. "I hadn't better stay around here," he said gloomily. "Wonder if it'd help if I went to town and had a talk with Willard Foster?"

"But can you offer Willard Foster any proof of your innocence, Pete?" Nora asked worriedly.

"I guess not," he admitted. "Like I've already said, I worked the rimrocks plumb on the north of my range for strays today. I didn't meet or even see anybody, all day long."

"And Kirk swears he saw you down at your fence, late this afternoon!" Nora said angrily.

"That's his story," Pete declared. "Kirk figgers I'm the reason you don't jump at the chance to marry him. He'll sure keep spoutin' his lies, hopin' to get this long neck of mine made a little longer by a hang-rope. Kirk didn't happen to be around the ranch about the time he claims he was up at the fence, and saw me, did he?"

"No such luck!" Nora said gravely. "And he wasn't in Agua Mala this afternoon, for a wonder. I went in with Mildred, and we shopped until late afternoon, then drove home. Kirk wasn't around town or I'd have seen him."

The "Mildred" Nora had mentioned was Mildred Avery, a middle-aged widow who had been the Jarboe housekeeper since the death of Nora's mother, a dozen years before. Pete thought of the pleasant, motherly housekeeper, and wondered if she had any idea where Kirk Jarboe had been that afternoon.

"How did Kirk act when one of the riders came out from town tonight and told him about Ed Coe?" Pete broke the silence.

"I don't know how Kirk found out about Ed's murder, Pete," Nora sighed. "He and Ed Coe were both here at the

ranch when Mildred and I left for town. I haven't seen Kirk since."

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Pete cried. "You mean Kirk wasn't around at supper time, or any time after that?"

"He wasn't," Nora answered. "But why are you excited about that, Pete?"

"When I woke up from havin' Joe Streeter's pistol bent over my head, Kirk was at my place," Pete said tensely. "He mentioned that one of the riders had come out from town, told him about Ed Coe and the posse startin' after me, and claimed he had saddled a horse and headed straight for my place."

"That's another of his sneaky lies!" Nora cried.

"And maybe the one that'll dig me out of the mess I'm in!" Pete said excitedly. "My gosh, Nora, Kirk hated Ed Coe like poison. Coe was always rubbin' his feathers the wrong way, insultin' him about his fancy clothes, throwin' digs at him about not bein' a fast enough talker to marry you. What if—"

Pete gulped, broke off. He felt Nora tense against his arms, and stared down at the pale oval of her up-turned face. They were silent for a long moment, their quick minds adjusting to the vista of ugly possibilities Pete's unfinished remark had opened to them.

"Yes, Pete!" Nora said tensely. "That—that must have been the way of it. *Kirk* murdered Ed Coe!"

"That's my hunch," Pete said gravely. "Ed Coe has come to my place several times, makin' half insultin' remarks and actin' like he wished I'd try to pull a gun on him. Ed and Kirk could have gone up there today. When they seen I wasn't home, it'd be like that sneaky Kirk to go into my house. Maybe Kirk spied my rifle, and dreamed up a way to stop Ed Coe from pickin' at him."

"And Kirk certainly meant to cost you your life, too!" Nora cried. "Pete, he must have stolen your rifle, then killed Ed Coe with it when they got to your fence and cut the wire. Kirk went back to your horse, fired on the posse when he heard them coming, then let your horses out of the corral so you could not escape. He wanted Joe Streeter and the posse to shoot you down, thinking they were defending their own lives!"

"Kirk blamed near got that very thing to happen!" Pete declared.

NORA suddenly grasped him by the arm, her fingers digging in with excitement.

"Let's get to the house and find one of Dad's hats and one of his guns for you," the girl said eagerly. "If we beat that posse to town and have a talk with Willard Foster, I believe we can turn the tables on Kirk."

"Well, I can't go gally-hootin' around the country with a posse doggin' my steps, that's for sure," Pete said uneasily. "Maybe—"

Pete did not finish. He whirled suddenly, putting his back to a whitish object that had moved there at the shadowy corral. Even as he whirled, Pete shoved Nora away from him. Then a gun was blasting thunder into Pete's ears, and he felt as if a horse had kicked him in the ribs. He smashed down against the earth, his senses reeling.

"Run to the county attorney, would you?" Kirk Jarboe's voice panted. "All right, here's another slug to make sure. Then I'll take care of my lovely cousin in the same way!"

Pete drew up his long legs as Jarboe moved in. Pete waited until the man was right on top of him, ornate six-shooter slanting down, then drove both boot heels into Jarboe's midriff. The six-shooter went off with a blast that was like a blowtorch on Pete's leg. Only he scarcely noticed that. He was on all fours, scrambling after Jarboe's tumbling shape.

Pete's head was reeling badly, and he felt weak and sluggish. But he got to Kirk Jarboe, got hold of his gun wrist, then sank a bony knee in the man's squirming middle. Pete hit at the pale blur of Jarboe's face with his free fist, and kept hitting until Nora's voice in his roaring ears and her firm little hands on

his shoulders stopped him.

Everything got foggy, although Pete was aware of movement and voices around him. When he did open his eyes he blinked into bright lamplight, then tried to sit up with a yelp of astonishment when he discovered that he was in a spacious, familiar room. His yelp became a grunt, however, when Nora Jarboe seized his shoulders, shoved him back hard against a bed that was downy and snow-white.

"Darling, please don't lunge around!" Nora begged. "Mildred, help me hold him; will you?"

Pete blinked up at Nora then, trying to grin. Her lovely face was so pale her brown hair looked black, and there was stark uneasiness in her gray eyes as she looked down at him. Pete saw plump, gray-haired Mildred Avery come to the bedside, look down at him out of bright, dark eyes.

"Hello, Mildred," he said quietly. "And you can let me loose now, Nora. I see you two have got me into your father's room, Nora. But what about that Jarboe rat?"

"Oh, golly-whompers, Pete!" Nora said, and buried her face on his bony shoulder.

"Very touching!" A nasty voice spoiled the moment.

Pete sat up in bed despite Nora's attempts to keep him flat. He discovered that he was tightly bandaged around the chest, but felt no pain as he moved. He looked across the room at Kirk Jarboe, whose handsome face was swollen and cut and bloody. Pete vaguely remembered hammering at that face with his left fist.

"You murdered Ed Coe today, Kirk, and fixed it so's I'd be accused of the crime!" Pete said harshly.

Nora sat on the bed beside him. She put an arm across his back, and he could feel her trembling as she waited, watching Kirk Jarboe in a kind of crazed fear. Jarboe sat propped up in the room's corner, many turns of rope about his legs, body and arms.

"Prove that *you* didn't murder Coe, you stupid hillbilly!" Jarboe's battered mouth sneered.

"I probably can't," Pete said wearily.

"In which case you'll go to trial, be found guilty, and hanged while my charming little cousin weeps beautifully!" Jarboe laughed coldly.

NO SIGN of emotion showed on Pete's face at the taunt.

"Guess again, Jarboe!" Pete said levelly. "Sure, your dirty tricks and lies have put me in a spot I maybe won't be able to wiggle out of. Only you'll not strut around to crow about it."

"What kind of stupid prattle is that?" Jarboe grunted.

"Why, it's mighty simple, Kirk," Pete said evenly. "Out here in this country, men count friendship a mighty big thing."

Pete saw a flicker of uneasiness in Jarboe's sullen eyes. He realized that Nora and Mildred Avery were both watching him, too, their eyes alert, hopeful.

"Bah!" Jarboe sneered. "Your talk makes no sense."

"Not to a dirty little alley-rat like you, maybe," Pete said coldly. "But it will to Tull Eldridge and big Sam Garland. They were Ed Coe's saddle-mates, his bosom friends. Maybe a jury won't listen to what few things I have to say, Kirk. But Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland will. They're tough, dangerous men, used to taking the law into their own hands."

"Shut up!" Kirk Jarboe croaked hoarsely.

"Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland are pretty smart jaspers, Kirk," Pete droned. "They know you hated Ed Coe for devilin' you the way he did. So when Nora and me tell Tull and Sam that you sure lied about bein' here at the ranch when someone came out and told you about Ed Coe, they'll fix you."

"Shut up, Harrison!" Kirk Jarboe said wildly. "I don't want Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland gettin' ideas. So let's make

a deal."

"Nora, can you and Mildred lift Kirk and carry him?" Pete asked.

"We carried him in here and tied him up," Mildred Avery said quietly.

"Good!" Pete said gravely. "The two of you get him out to the barn and gag him. The sheriff will be along, and I don't want him to see Kirk. I'm savin' Kirk for Tull and Sam to work on."

Nora and Mildred Avery took their cues beautifully. When they started towards him, Jarboe screamed in a frenzied way, fighting the bonds that held him helpless.

"Harrison, listen to me!" he panted. "I'll pull the noose off your neck by writin' and signin' a full confession."

"What would you confess to, somethin' desperate like throwin' rocks at lizards?" Pete grunted.

"You fool, I killed Ed Coe!" Kirk Jarboe croaked. "We went up to your house today. Ed was drinkin', and wanted to see if he could pick a fight with you. When he found out you weren't at home, he started takin' it out on me. I stepped inside your front door, took your rifle off the antlers, and leveled the gun at Ed. I told him to stop insultin' me or get shot. He laughed at me, turned his back, and dared me to shoot. I blew his head half off!"

"You killed Coe right there at my place?" Pete cried.

"I did!" Jarboe grinned wolfishly. "But don't get bright ideas. I removed all sign, put Coe's body on his horse, and took it down to your fence. I cut the wire, left that cartridge in the brush, and was about to ride off when I heard the Luther boys out on the road, singin' their hill-billy songs. I fired a shot to draw their attention, then got out of there."

"And you went back to Pete's house!" Nora said shakily. "Kirk, you fired on the posse with Pete's own rifle."

"Don't get mouthy with me, you little witch!" Jarboe glared at her. "I've still got this speckle-faced Harrison where I want him."

"With three of us having just heard you confess to Ed Coe's murder?" Mildred Avery retorted.

"Yeah, I'm still runnin' the show!" Jarboe sneered. "If you three repeat what I've said, I'll swear you dreamed it all up. Harrison would hang for Ed Coe's murder, even if I did have a little trouble out of Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland. I made a mistake when I claimed I was here at the ranch when news of Ed Coe's death came to me, though. Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland found out I'd told Harrison that, and started tryin' to corner me. I slipped away in the dark, but they'll follow. So I'll still make a deal with you, Harrison."

"That confession business, eh?" Pete grunted.

"I'll write and sign the confession, with you three as witnesses, if you'll give me your word that you'll say nothin' to the law or to Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland for one full week!" Jarboe panted. "Give me that much of a start, and I'll be where even smart bulls can't nose me out."

PETE merely laughed. "I'm still not interested," Pete said and shrugged. "You'd weasel out of the deal, somehow."

"You blasted bumpkin!" Jarboe whined. "Haven't you brains enough to want to save your own neck?"

"Yeah, I'd sort of like to keep from gettin' hung," Pete declared. "Nora has promised to marry me soon as our beefs are shipped, this fall. Getting hung would spoil that."

"I wish I had known you two were plottin' somethin' like that!" Jarboe panted savagely. "But to hell with you both. Turn me loose and let me write that confession. Swear that you'll keep your mouths shut for a full week before you show the confession to that clown of a sheriff, and I'll—"

"I reckon I've heard all I need to, Kirk!" a deep, angry voice interrupted suddenly.

Big Joe Streeter was crawling clum-

sily through a window as he talked. He sat down on the floor inside, looking slowly around. The sheriff's face was skinned, one cold gray eye was ringed with puffed, purple flesh, and his shirt was little more than shreds.

"Golly-whompers, Joe!" Nora cried. "What happened to you?"

"I feel like I'd been fightin' a panther in the dark!" the sheriff sighed. "Only it was a spotty-faced, two-legged critter that started the ruckus by hurlin' sticks of stovewood into a dark room that was full of twitchy-nerved men. Pete, you hurt?"

"Sort of, yes," Pete said uneasily.

"Well, I'm sorry," Joe Streeter said heavily. "I wanted the pleasure of cripplin' you myself!"

The sheriff got up, battered face scowling when Nora and Mildred Avery both giggled. The badge man limped over to where Kirk Jarboe lay, goggling and shaken.

The sheriff stood there, huge and angry and battered, sweat dribbling off his face and massive hands.

"I ought to stamp you right into this floor, Kirk!" he said heavily. "You sure just about fixed Pete Harrison's clock with your lies and murderin'. I saw Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland watchin' you like there was a bee in their bonnets, and got suspicious when you sneaked away. I follered you, and was close enough to hear your gun when you tried to kill Pete. I've been hangin' around outside, hopin' Tull Eldridge and Sam Garland would show up and get to jawin' with you about whatever was on their minds. Only I don't want Tull and Sam showin' up now. I might have to shoot one or both of them monkeys to protect my prisoner."

"Joe, bless you!" Nora cried.

She ran to the big, ragged sheriff, her bright eyes searching Streeter's battered face. Mildred Avery went to the sheriff's side, too, smiling and patting him in a way that brought a slow grin to his battered mouth.

"Scat, both of you!" the sheriff chuckled. "Durn it, I ought to stay mad at that sorry Pete. You should see them banged-up fellers in my posse!"

"But you won't arrest Pete now, will you, Joe?" Nora smiled sweetly.

"Not after I heard Jarboe talk his way into a hangin'," Streeter said with a scowl. "I'll wait until Pete gets over his hurts. Then I'm fixin' to tie him to a snubbin' post and throw a whole cord of stovewood at that peckerwood's head of his!"

Believe in Signs?

BACK in the 1880s, one Arizona town put up a sign at either end of the main street where all who entered the community could see it. It read: "Our jail is as large, but not as nice, as our hotel. Where will YOU be stopping?"

Another Arizona town's welcoming sign read: "Our marshal and his deputies shave each other with their six-shooters. Stranger, keep your gun holstered!"

More recently, an Arizona city put up a sign that reads: "167 died here last year from gas—11 inhaled it, 9 put a match to it, and 147 stepped on it."

—*Mark Knight.*

(Continued from page 6)

ning ponies of the Klamaths generally won. When the Umpquas ran out of stakes, which usually was dried salmon, they wagered and lost their young and best-looking girls. That whittled down the reproduction of their clan. The potlatches kept the Umpquas impoverished.

Then came the white man. Another offshoot of the Klamath-Modoc tribes, the Rogue River Indians, went on the warpath. On the Rogue, south of the Umpqua, came an uprising with sieges and bloody massacres.

Feeling ran high among early Oregon settlers. It got so they'd shoot any Indian on sight, figuring that all Indians were hostile.

This was unjust to the Umpquas, who were still a peaceful people. So some well-meaning whites rounded them up and for the Umpquas' own protection put them in a temporary camp at a place called Looking Glass, about twelve miles west of the present town of Roseburg.

A Disagreeable Episode

At Looking Glass, along in the 1850's, there occurred one of those disgraceful episodes that darken the annals of pioneer times. A mob of ruthless white men surrounded Looking Glass and all but exterminated the helpless, unarmed Umpquas.

There is no account of this outrage in any written history of the Northwest. But it is remembered by some aged and withered squaws, over at Klamath Agency. For they had been Umpqua girls, pawns in the potlatch games.

In 1932, Chief Mace died. That left Jasper Palouse, last of the Umpquas. He was womanless. He is living out his days in a settlement of French halfbreeds, in the upper Umpqua wilderness.

Until recent years, when Uncle Sam undertook a payoff to Indians who had been cheated of their rights under early treaties, these mixed French people were believed to be Umpqua Indians. But government investigators, looking into their treaty claims, found them to be descended from French-Canadians, Hudson's Bay trappers stock.

Chief Mace owned tribal rights to a tract of land, considered almost worthless during his lifetime, but the virgin timber on it, giant firs, is mighty valuable now. Jasper Palouse inherited that land. But his claim is buried in red tape at Washington. He has received neither title nor any benefits whatever.

And now the day has come when "timber pirates" are at large in the Cascades. Many unprotected land holdings have been stripped of fortunes in logs. What will happen to this last fragment of Umpqua-owned land in all that great forest empire that only three generations ago was all Umpqua land?

The whine of the power saw and the roar and rumble of log trucks echo in the timberland these days. At the present unrestricted rate of cut, it will all be ugly, barren, useless stumpland in time soon to come.

On a Par With Rustlers

Of course, timber pirates are not responsible for all this. In logging circles they are on a par with the cattle rustlers of the rangelands. But even so, according to government figures, cattle rustling losses in the West only last year reached a staggering half-billion dollars.

Nobody knows the extent of timber piracy, on private and public land. Logs bring high prices down at the busy, smoking lumber mills at Roseburg and elsewhere. It's boomtimes. The conservation program of the U. S. Forest Service has been brushed aside. The government auctions off huge tracts of timber to the big logging companies without concern for the future.

Gigantic trucks with towering loads of logs make endless procession down the old Umpqua trail. It is no footpath nowadays, trod by moccasined feet. Up from Roseburg, along the river all the way to its source at Diamond Lake, the government is building a super-highway at the cost of many millions. It is indicated on maps as an "access road." But it is a marvel and triumph of engineering, putting to shame the narrow, twisty, outdated main highway arteries of the state.

King Log

The log is king in the land of the Umpquas. Deer and bear and elk are driven back as the

forest is devoured and the air is bitter with the smoke of slashing fires.

But the fish still come. Up from the sea, in the miracle of spawning migrations, come the chinook, king of the salmon, also the smaller silverside salmon and the giant, seagoing rainbow trout, the steelhead. Along with diminishing numbers of a companion fish, the seagoing cutthroat, called salmon trout, harvest trout or bluebacks.

Among sportsmen the upper Umpqua is world-famous for its steelhead fly fishing. From five to ten pounds and larger they come, and only the skilled and seasoned angler can hope to land one in that rushing mountain stream.

Starting its life journey as a little 10-inch johnny trout, the steelhead returns from the ocean in three years as one of the world's most powerful and spectacular game fish.

How long these fish runs will last is a matter of serious concern. Power dams are going up on the upper Umpqua, as on nearly all Western rivers. An old, low dam at Winchester is passed by means of a fish ladder, which is a succession of pools connected by a diverted flow passing through spillways. But some of the new dams will be too high for fish ladders. Whey they are finished, the salmon and steelhead will undoubtedly go the way of the Umpqua Indians. The benefits of civilization are paid for out of the pocketbook of Nature.

A Friendly Deer

In times past, in this get-together, I've told you gals and galluses about pet deer I've met up with here and there. A deer is about the shyest of wild critters, yet right often takes up with human society in the most amazing fashion.

The latest oddity along this line happened just this past season on the Umpqua.

Upriver lives a logger named Willie McCoy. He came out on his cabin porch one morning—and there stood a deer. It didn't run. It wiggled its ears and came up trustfully to him. It wasn't any fawn. It was a forked-horn buck, full-grown.

The McCoy dog showed up about that time. Deer are afraid of dogs, everybody knows that. But not this deer. It was as friendly with the dog as with Willie McCoy, and in that unexplainable, occasional comradeship among creatures, the dog responded in like fashion.

[*Turn page*]

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Well, Willie McCoy ate breakfast, got in his car and drove up the mountain road to the mill where he worked. He was properly amazed, when he reached the mill, to find that the dog and deer had followed his car.

That wasn't all. He found out, after that, that whenever he opened the car door, the deer tried to get in. After that, the deer rode back and forth with McCoy.

No Captive

When I met up with them, Willie McCoy was headed for Roseburg, with the deer taking its ease in the back seat.

"We're going to git our pictures taken," grinned Logger McCoy.

"It's against the law to capture a wild deer," somebody reminded him.

"Capture? Heck, this deer ain't no captive! He climbed in of his own accord. Why? Don't ask me. Just got tired o' walkin', I guess."

The deer bore no marks to indicate handling or restraint, or that it was somebody's runaway pet. Nobody around had lost a pet deer. Not for ten years or so, anyhow. Not since a mountain rancher named Bill Boyd, in that same vicinity, had fed and raised an orphaned fawn. The Boyd deer met an untimely end at the hands of a "sportsman." Somebody reminded Willie McCoy of that, and that the Boyd deer had been ruthlessly shot, even though it wore a bell around its neck.

"Some pot hunters would shoot a deer wearin' a red hat!" snorted Willie McCoy. "Well, you can bet that if any harm comes to this deer, in or out of huntin' season, somebody's going to have a McCoy feud on his hands, yessir!"

Salty Bill

The Umpqua country has heaps of backwoodsmen who have acquired fame, in one way or another, and are locally known as "characters." But none are saltier characters than one Bill Bradley.

Bill hit the Umpqua country years ago, a pilgrim or newcomer. He aimed to stay around a few days. After about a month passed, up from Roseburg came a search party to find out what had happened to him. They heard an ax going up in the woods. The sound led them to their "missing man." It was Bill Bradley, building himself a log cabin.

In the years that followed, Bill Bradley's goings-on developed into a saga that is still told and retold. It seems that he eked out a living by putting up "jerky," dried venison. He'd load a pack train with it and sell it down Roseburg way.

Some of that deer meat, folks say, tasted an awful lot like beef that had strayed in front of Bill Bradley's rifle sights. Their suspicions were not entirely unjustified. Bill had a big gray mare that broke her leg. He shot her and jerked the carcass. Next pack trip downriver Bill was selling "elk meat."

Bill had a big band of horses and when pasture got poor he burned off the brush to start new grass. Consequently, the Forest Service went looking for Bill. Two rangers found him at his cabin.

"We've got a warrant for your arrest, Bill," they told him. "You're heading for the Roseburg jail."

"Fine!" Bill said enthusiastically. "Glad to oblige."

A Slippery Customer

He piled on a horse, bareback, and meekly let himself be herded down the river trail. The rangers sort of wondered why Bill didn't use a saddle.

Pretty soon he reined up.

"Got a hoss yonder on that flat in hobbles," he told them. "Reckon I better git them hobbles off, if I ain't going to be around for a spell."

Bill took off for the flat. The rangers waited. He didn't show up. After awhile they investigated.

He'd had a hobbled horse, all right. Also, he'd had a saddle and rifle stashed out. He'd slipped out of their hands.

Bill Bradley continued to be a slippery customer. All other efforts to apprehend him failed, so a pack of bloodhounds was fetched in and put on his tracks.

That was the last anybody ever saw of that pack of hounds. Later on, when Bill showed up in populated parts, he was asked if the bloodhounds had caught up with him.

"Sure," he nodded. "They come to my camp. Was around for quite a spell. I fed 'em up good."

On his next jerky selling expedition, Bill Bradley's regular customers just didn't seem to be hungry for meat. The chances were about ten to one, they claimed, that Bill

[*Turn page*]

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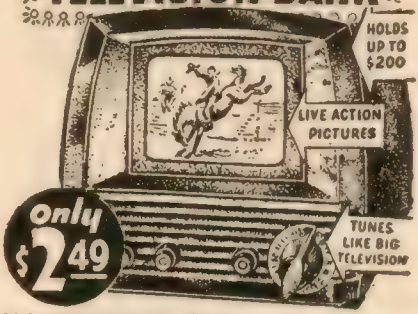

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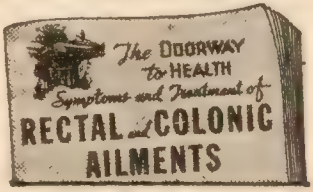

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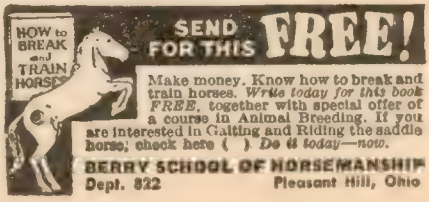
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was peddling jerked bloodhound.

Finally came a day when a mishap overtook this elusive character, Bill Bradley. In mounting a fractious horse, he was thrown with his foot caught in a stirrup. The county coroner's report stated that Bill was "drug to death."

Well, gals and galluses, it's time to say *adios* until we meet in our next get-together in this here Frontier Post. Hope you'll all be on hand.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

YOUR editor went to New York's La Guardia Airport the other night to see a friend off for Texas. And it gave us something to think about. Said friend's plane took off around ten-thirty, and if weather didn't affect the schedule the plane was due in Houston some time the next morning. Less than ten hours to cover roughly 1500 miles as a crow flies.

Well, instead of this modern day and age, suppose it had been a hundred years ago our friend was bound for Texas, leaving from New York. How would he get there in the quickest time? Let's say he took a train for the West. It wasn't until 1852 that rails from the East reached Chicago. By a series of connecting railroads he could have reached the Great Lakes and gone on by boat to Chicago and thence overland by horse or stagecoach to his destination. Perhaps he could have gone as far as Harrisburg, Penna., by rail and then made his way west as best he could. Or he might have gone to rail's end on the few straggling lines putting their steel tentacles southward. But suppose he decided to make the trip to Texas by horseback.

At the most, and it would probably be stretching it a bit, he would have averaged only about twenty miles a day for the 1500-mile trip. That would give an elapsed time of seventy-five days. Quite a difference, isn't it, between seventy-five days and ten hours? It makes one believe that the building up of our country was dependent mainly on transportation—the more transportation the faster it grew, until today, the distance between coasts is not measured so much in miles as in elapsed time it takes to get from one to the other.

Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield doesn't have any modern police airplanes or high-powered

automobiles to get him around the big state of Texas. His wonder horse Goldy is his sole means of transportation—and Jim gets around pretty well on the back of his equine friend. Matter of fact, in GOLDEN GUNS, by Jackson Cole, in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS, Goldy transports Hatfield to the village of Big Spring at the bottom of the Panhandle in time for him to put a gang of tough-riding, hard-shooting, murdering desperadoes right where they belong—six feet underground. . . .

As usual, grizzled old Captain Bill McDowell, head of the Texas Rangers, didn't mince any words when he called in his ace operative, Hatfield, and gave him the low-down on the case.

"It's a long ride, Ranger," growled McDowell, pointing to the big map on his office wall. "All the way to the southern Panhandle. Big Spring's the nearest settlement. There's plenty of ranches that way and they've been attacked by a passel of cusses led by a notorious bandit called Bronco Phil Dales. Dales is wanted for thievery and shootings from Kansas to Mexico. I got complaints from Colonel Abe Tollen, owner of the Big T west of Big Spring. The outlaws hit his spread, killed a cowboy and almost got Tollen himself. They've fired on other spreads. Ranger law has got to be carried to that big, new country opening up out there! You savvy how few men I can spare. You'll have to go it alone."

The prospect didn't seem to dismay the big Ranger. But he took his young pal, Buck Robertson, along—mainly to give the lad another opportunity to see just how the law worked.

For a session of undiluted reading pleasure, look forward to GOLDEN GUNS, next issue's novel, wherein famed Ranger Jim Hatfield once more tangles with those outside the Law and brings added fame to the illustrious name of the Texas Rangers!

Your old friend Long Sam Littlejohn rides in the next issue, too . . . in LONG SAM MOOCHES A MEAL, by Lee Bond. Sam was just naturally hungry—and that's what got him into trouble, although this time he didn't have to tangle with a brusque little man who wears derby hats, neatly tailored suits and smokes fierce cigars—better known as Joe Fry, Deputy United States Marshal and Long Sam's nemesis from way back.

No, this time Sam tangles with a crooked

[*Turn page*]

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pair of brothers named Hooper, who figure that under the disguise of Vigilantes they can get away with murder—literally. Long Sam has something to say about that, however—particularly when he gets his stomach full of good food. If you're hungry for a good Western, this is it!

The next issue, too, will carry another in the series of Famous Texas Rangers—THE EMPIRE DREAMER, by Harold Preece. Morris Lasker, young storekeeper in Weatherford, Texas, was the second man of Jewish faith to serve in the Texas Rangers. The first was a man named Kleberg. When the Comanches went on the warpath and harassed the frontier around Weatherford, Lasker, although he wore eyeglasses, insisted on joining the volunteer Rangers detailed to accompany the regular Rangers in running down the Indians. Read how Morris Lasker, who had made his own way in life since he was twelve, declared he'd come to Texas to be a Texan and would accept the risks and responsibilities of other Texans.

These and other articles and stories will be found in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS—an issue jam-packed with thrills and action from cover to cover! Be on hand for the best in reading enjoyment!

OUR MAIL BAG

HI, EVERYBODY! Here we are again and darn glad to be with you and read all the correspondence you sent in. But there's still not enough to satisfy this hardened old editor, so sharpen your pencils, fill your fountain pens or put a new ribbon in your typewriter—for we'd like to hear loud and long from you good readers. Tell us what you think of TEXAS RANGERS, what you would like to see in it, or what you don't like as it is now. Let's upend the Mail Bag and see what gives:

Just one thing I'd like to ask: How does Mr. Cole know so much about the places in which his stories take place? He always hits the nail right on top of the head. I'm always at the newsstands waiting until Jim comes riding along. —*Buel Moore, Houston, Texas.*

I have been reading the British edition of *Texas Rangers* for many years. The exploits of Jim Hatfield are greatly enjoyed by a large number of fans Down Under. You may be surprised to learn that Jim Hatfield yarns are also published in hard-cover form by a British publishing firm. So you see Jim has gotten out of the

magazines and into books out this way.—*Roger N. Dard, Perch, Western Australia.*

In my opinion, your book is just tops! And as for Jim Hatfield—he really is loyal to his Rangers. I feel sorry for Jackson Cole, though. He can't please everyone, as they have different ideas. My favorite character is Long Sam Littlejohn. Lee Bond certainly knows his stuff.—*Carol Trullinger, Willow Springs, Missouri.*

Just keep the stories coming the way they are. I sure enjoy them.—*Ronnie Hisko, Ashdad, Ontario.*

Today I read for the first time your magazine, and frankly, I must admit I'm not quite sure what to make of it.—*Kenneth Colton, Indianapolis, Indiana.*

I have been reading *Texas Rangers* for a long time, now. I really do like to read about Buck being Jim's sidekick. I enjoy reading the magazine very much, so keep up the good work.—*Betty Allen, Worthville, Kentucky.*

That does it, folks. We're a little puzzled by Kenneth Colton's brief note. Elucidate, won't you, Mr. Colton? But now—we'll have to pull the strings on the Mail Bag until the next issue. And when we open it again we hope we'll find it full to the brim with letters and postcards from you good readers. Kindly address all your correspondence to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody. So long, good-bye, and *adios* until the next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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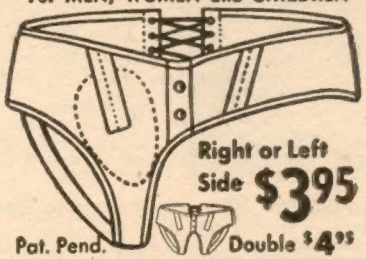

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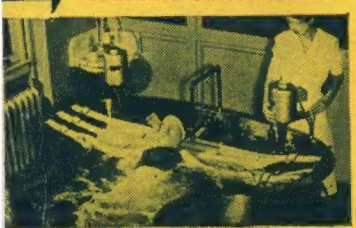

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